Editor’s Note

Dear Artists and Writers,

What is beauty? It seems like a pretty easy question to answer, but think about it for a minute. What is it that makes those Arizona sunsets so beautiful? Or the aqua colored water of the Caribbean so damn memorable? Is it in the colors? As I’ve sifted through your photographs and read your words during my tenure as Editor, it was this seemingly simple, three word question that kept ringing in my ears. I didn’t know what it was, but I could recognize it when I saw it and I knew that I desperately craved it. Because we are subjected to the little ugly parts of life every single day, we need beauty in the world to give us something to truly appreciate, something to hope for, something to just fucking survive.

It can be anything from a baby’s giggle to a stranger’s smile, a hug from Grandma to fresh snow in the morning - these are all tangible things though. What’s so beautiful about poetry, about literature, about art as a whole, is its unique ability to create something within the human soul that stirs your heart, makes you laugh out loud, drowns you in your own tears, gives you the motivation to want to change the world, and eventually forces you into a raw and passionate embrace of truth.

It is this essence of honesty that I kept glimpsing as I combed through the submissions and as the journal has slowly materialized, time and time again, I have been confronted by the sheer beauty of what you’ve created. Every word, every image printed began as a separate entity with its own individual flame, but within this journal, your creativity, love, brutal honesty, and pain have begun a fire inside of me, have made me ask the question: what is beauty?

Editor-in-Chief,
Madelaine Hoptry
writersINC Staff

Editor-in-Chief
Madelaine Hoptry

Assistant Editors
Mason Manna
Samantha Holley

Graphic Designer
Cody Owens

Layout Concept
Stacey Gardner

Staff Advisor
Dr. Marilyn Knight

writersINC would like to thank:

Dr. Marilyn Knight
The USC Upstate Media Board
Lisa Anderson
Dean Laura Puckett-Boler

WritersINC is a publication of the University of South Carolina Upstate. All rights are reserved by the authors and artists. Opinions expressed within this journal do not necessarily reflect those of the WritersINC staff or the USC Upstate campus.
Poetry Award
Zack Compton for
*Fair Elyse*

Non-fiction Award
Nicole Yancey for
*Potty Training 2.0*

Fiction Award
Joe Bodie for
*Delayed*

Art Award
Sierra Damato for
*Wolves*

Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Award*
Zack Compton for
*Travelin’ Jack*

* The Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Award was established by the poet in 1985. The award is given to students whose work is judged distinguished by a panel of Upstate faculty chaired by Dr. Warren Carson.*
# Table of Contents

## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travelin’ Jack</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zack Compton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masquerade</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Corrie McGinnis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shining Thread</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kalauren McMillan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Bitter Love Letter #2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Madelaine Hoptry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ob me Ob my</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cody Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Book of Life</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>D’Shannon Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night Terrors</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Somaria Ali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Bitter Love Letter #4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Madelaine Hoptry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair Elyse</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Zack Compton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful Hearts, Loving Minds</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Oscar Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please Hold</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WE</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Madelaine Hoptry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Daniel Gorski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Cody Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Vickie Dailey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Jyo Kokri-Bhatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Sheep</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Robert Clark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Story</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Kelsey Rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Race of a Champion</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>Etoria Hallums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled #5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Prose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holding On</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Joe Bodie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potty Training 2.0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Nicole Yancey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Park</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caitlin DeZerne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Preface</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Madelaine Hoptry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Joe Bodie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments in Time</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Sondra Qualey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Joe Bodie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man’s Best Friend</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Cody Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am Shenandoab</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>Brandon Burnett</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

writersINC
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three Three Three</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sherry Kennedy Ables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of These Days</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Justin Ryon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tammy Freeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feed the Birds</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Samantha Holley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anguili</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Lane Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Derek Ninneman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Noon</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Sierra Damato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Time</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Samantha Holley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Built-in Sharpener</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Justin Ryon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm and Cool</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Derek Ninneman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox Guy</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Lane Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl in Color</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Lane Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Lit Alley</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Cody Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Portrait</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Christopher Turner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Mason Manna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Basilica en la Lluvia</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Samantha Holley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrifuge</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Johnathon Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I See You</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criss-Cross</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Katelyn Gmerek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery Loves its Company</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Sherry Kennedy Ables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolves</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Sierra Damato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>Katelyn Gmerek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyboard Cat</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Elliott Cobb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Travelin’ Jack

Zack Compton

Growing stale, barred and confined.
The air’s thick, hope has resigned.
Travelin’ Jack, travel no more.
Tired minds and hearts are sore.
Dodging bullets silently fired.
Travelin’ Jack’s looking mighty tired.
Rambling Man, gonna need a friend.
He’s got delusions, here comes the end.
Travelin’ Jack, you better watch your back.
Gonna worry your way straight to a heart attack.
The life line’s steadily gaining slack.
But that’s the way it goes when you’re a Travelin’ Jack.
Travelin’ Jack’s determined to the max.
That future’s lost, go home, relax.
Jack won’t listen, Jack be blind.
Keep on traveling, the heart won’t mind.
Carry on, carry on, love your misdirection.
What are you seeing in your own reflection?
Jack saw the future, gonna change his fate.
Travelin’ Jack say sorry, I’m afraid you’re too late.
Travelin’ Jack, you better watch your back.
Gonna worry your way straight to a heart attack.
The life line’s steadily gaining slack.
But that’s the way it goes when you’re a Travelin’ Jack.
Hands on the clock, they move too fast
In tune with the rhythm of your heart;
You’re out of time; make the stillness last
And prepare yourself to play a part.

Personalities swiftly surround me
I feel the gazes as I pass.
Pretentiousness is all around me
But I know the face behind the mask.

I know the truth inside the lie
So much for your disguise.
I saw your artificial smile
As you planned for his demise.

Pretending changes nothing.
It only masks the truth.
You thought you had deceived me
But all along I knew.

Take away the mask
And face the truth.
Then maybe you will see:
The only person you cannot fool
With your masquerade
Is me.
Three Three Three

Sherry Kennedy Ables

Copic ink pens
The Shining Thread

Kalauren McMillan

I looked out into the darkened abyss
A tumult of raging waves and crashing hopes
Fear gripped my heart as the water rose
Threatening and choking all I dreamed

As I stared, a glimmer came
As if bidden by my aching heart
A shining thread into the mayhem
It calls my name and whispers

‘This is your hope, my darling
Take my hand and grasp firm
For I will lead you through life
And give you all that I am.’

Tears burn my eyes as I reach
For I know you, as I know myself
You were there in the dark
You were my guide and my hope

I looked to the horizon and saw
You sitting there with a smile
I know your name, close to me
I call in joy, knowing you’re there
‘Mother’
She drives, clenching the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands, keeping the car on a steady and resolute course, aimed like a bullet in the center of the lane, speeding down the freeway at speeds she has never before reached, the asphalt of the freeway crumbling beneath her tires, the colors, white and yellow and black, coalescing into an abstract painting as the speedometer reaches 110, and the night and the road and the lights blur together into one entity as she steals a glance in the rearview mirror, the police cars still behind her in steady pursuit, relentless and implacable, trailing her like the past, like regret, and she knows that they will never give up, the lights of their sirens washing the night sky in broad brush strokes of blues and reds, a swirling, tempestuous maelstrom of authority and order, the force winds of a future blocked, stillborn, denied, dreamed but never destined to materialize, and she pushes her foot down on the gas, and she leans back in the seat, an inertia forced repose, her arms outstretched and taut, locked in position like steel support beams, and the needle on the speedometer pushes forward with a mechanical obstinacy, as gears redline and pistons scream, 125, 140, the needle pushed to its limit and her pushing as well, forward, obstinate and determined, evading both the past and the future, but especially the present, hoping to collapse the three together into a new sense of time and place, a new life, and she checks again in the rearview mirror and sees that the police cars are falling behind, she is gaining ground, advantage, if only for an instant, but she will take it, dwell in it, in that instant and its promises, and entertain ideas of hope and victory, and she hears a faint sound invade the interior of the car, almost silent, quiet, at first, but growing in intensity, a steady beeping, an importunate and consistent sound, louder now, demanding not to be ignored, and she realizes, as the sound increases in volume, its familiarity, recognizes, in a slow and stifled cognition, that she has heard the sound many times before, everyday now for eight years, everyday now for eight years, every morning, and as the sights and colors, the whites and yellows of the freeway and the blues and reds of the police, begin to fade
away, their vibrancy diminishing, she realizes she is waking up, stolen from sleep by the steady, invading sound of her alarm clock.

---

Elizabeth stands in her kitchen. Pots and pans sit on the stove. Pots and pans that cooked breakfast and are now empty and encrusted with the remnants of eggs and bacon. Plates and bowls and glasses sit neglected on the table. The thin remaining film of milk and orange juice and coffee coats their inner surfaces. Elizabeth sees a table that needs to be cleared. She sees a labor an hour in the making and gone and consumed in half of that. She sees herself as the unsung hero of the early morning. The underappreciated. The help, sometimes it feels.

It is Monday and the kids have just left for school. It is the start of a routine that is a five day cycle. Elizabeth starts to clear the table. She piles the plates and bowls and glasses and pots and pans into the sink. She stands at the counter. Her hands on the marble surface. Her head downcast. She sighs and walks away.

Through the sliding glass door and into her backyard. She takes a pack of cigarettes off a wrought iron table. She pulls one from the pack and lights it. The smoke from her cigarette plumes skyward. Elizabeth follows her first exhalation with her eyes. The dawning sun ascends in the sky. The oranges and yellows of the early morning becoming the blue of the afternoon. Her gaze retreats to the table. A collection of beer cans. Thirteen to be precise. Evidence of her husband’s night last night. Evidence of his own private revelry. Left for the help. For her. To clean up. Not asked. Not implied. Expected. She expects the pile will reappear tomorrow morning. Is certain of it. She crumples her still burning cigarette in the ashtray. She sighs again. She walks inside the house. It doesn’t feel like a home. It feels like walls. It feels court ordered. She grabs a few white garbage bags from under the sink. She grabs some cleaning supplies. She grabs some yellow plastic gloves. She sets them on the counter. She sighs. It is the start of a routine that is a seven day cycle. Endless and thankless.

---

She runs, down dimly lit hallways made of rock and grey stone and wet with the water that trickles down the crevices from a ceiling too high to be visible, her legs and lungs
ache, red with pain, the tendons of her calves tight like coiled steel, hot with friction and movement, something is behind her, pursuing, something not seen but felt, shadowy and clawed, behind her in the labyrinthine corridors, unrelenting, she knows that the beast will never stop, chasing her like her shadow and perhaps it is, something from the darkness immemorial, intrinsically and irrevocably attached to her, but she must try, she must run, evade, persevere, she must find the strength, her lungs and legs enervated, her body weak, it all happening so fast, and she swears she wasn't here a second ago, but has been here before, turned this corner, collided with these walls, felt the water on her shoulder, gazed down the hallway that stretches into the blackness of eternity, the first black, and she tries to pick up speed, to reach the end, and time slows to a crawl, she is running through air, dense and stifling and impeding, and she calls on energy that she knows, fears, is long depleted, and tries to run through the density, her hands feeling the walls beside her, steadying her, and she feels the breath of the beast, cold and hot and mocking, the weight on her chest, and she turns a corner, quickly, stumbling, meeting a dead end, the large grey wall, her hands pressed against the cold and wet stone, the numbers 6:30, as big as a billboard, displayed in an iridescent and glowing red, pulsating in rhythm with her breath, as she inhales and exhales, and she wakes in her bed with the wet of the walls on her chest.

---

Elizabeth sits in her SUV. Plastic grocery bags fill the space behind her. Eggs and bacon and cereal. Bread and meat and condiments. Orange juice and coffee grounds. Everything it takes to sustain a family. She will stock the commissary when she gets home. The mess hall. There is detergent and all-purpose cleaners. Brand names like Joy. Sparkle. Pictures of happy women and their plastic-gloved hands. Their smiles admiring dishwasher-fresh wine glasses. Smudge free. This is your life. A packaged existence. A marketed reality. This is what you should care about:

A husband and a family. And a house surrounded by a white picket fence.

But the American dream is shattered. Rudely awakened to an intoxicated and inattentive husband. To importunate and demanding children. To mounting debt. The bank
owns more of the house than you do. The picket fence is not painted at all. And no Tom Sawyer in sight. Mark Twain and Norman Rockwell’s lies. The fairy tale we were all force fed as children has turned out to be more like castor oil and less like birthday cake. And there are no princesses or knights in shining armor. Only ugly reality. Only housewives and factory workers.

Elizabeth lights a cigarette and looks in the rearview mirror. She angles it to better frame her face. She scrutinizes. Her forehead. Her cheeks. Her chin. It is an obsession. It is a symptom of a greater disease. She discovers a few bumps on her forehead. Above her left eye. Blackheads. Embryonic pimples. They will go away on their own. But Elizabeth cannot help prodding. She takes a drag on her cigarette and puts it down in the ashtray to free up her hands. She takes a blackhead between her index fingers and squeezes. She squints her eyes and purses her lips. And then she squeezes. Squeezes until the blackhead bursts. She feels the pain and the pop. The release. The pain. She feels. She squeezes until the white string has stopped and is replaced by blood. She squeezes in pumps. Until there is no more. Until her index fingers are stained and coated. She rolls her thumb and index finger together. Until the blood is dispersed. Until it is less the red of blood and more the pink of her fingers. She looks in the mirror again and resumes the search. One on her cheek. She presses and squeezes. Burst. Pain. Feel. Squeeze. Pump. Blood. Is this your life? Is this what you should care about?

---

She sits, on a chair in the sand, facing the ocean, the waves lapping the shore in a steady cadence, the crash and the fizz, a comforting static hum, the ebb and flow, white sand stretching endless and flat, the sun midday in the sky, shining golden yellow rays of warmth and heat on her bikinied body, her skin browned and shiny from a mixture of lotion and sweat, breath it in, the beach, the sand, the lotion, she leans up from her repose, supported by her elbows, and takes a sip from the martini glass on the table in the sand beside her, the cool and refreshing vodka flowing down her throat, the warm burn of liquor, the numbing, and she looks around the empty beach as a breeze blows slowly across her body and her hair, the scene, the blue of the beach and the yellow of the sun, subdued and dif-
fused through the lenses of her sunglasses, the silence, the
calm and the serenity, the crash and the fizz, she is young
again, she will always be young, and the future is as vast
and mysterious as the ocean before her and its depths, it
is a feeling, an epiphany, she wishes to hold on to, but it
will not last, cannot last, it is not in the nature of things, it
is antithetical to the procession of time, she realizes this
anddamnsthearchitectoftime,thenature,oratleastthestate,
of things as well, and she looks at the ocean and sees
that there is no ebb, only flow, the waves not receding,
never going back, only forward, moving in on the beach,
on her, resolute and unstoppable, they are getting closer
now, increasingly, the waves, and the crash drowns out
the fizz, becomes louder, a sonorous boom, a steady pulse,
the amplified tick of an everlasting metronome, and the
translucent diffusion of her sunglasses progress to a black
opaqueness, and she cannot see, cannot see the waves or
the yellow of the sun or the white of the sand and all of
its purity and promise, she can only feel the waves as they
reach her feet and progress, move up to her knees and
then to her chest, cold and salty, up to her throat, her chin,
and a voice whispers softly in her ear as the waves inch to
her mouth, ‘Mom, wake up,’ and she does. Her quick and
heavy breaths slow into one final sigh. And she smiles. She
rolls over and picks her daughter up with both arms and
throws her onto the bed. And they both smile and laugh.
Her daughter resting on her chest, she holds her tight and
strokes her hair. Elizabeth looks out of the bedroom win-
dow, continually stroking the blonde hair of her daughter,
the hair that is definitely her mother’s, and she sees the
early morning dawn. The warm yellows and bright oranges
blending in the sky, Elizabeth continues to smile and hold
on.
Photograph
Dear Lover,

You’re never going to read this letter
Because I’m never going to send it.
The mail man drives too slowly,
I used my last envelope a week ago,
and you would never be able to read
Past my elaborately heart dotted i’s and curly L’s and Q’s.
(I promise I’m not just making excuses).

Actually,
There aren’t really any q’s
(Well, now there are two).
I’m just not brave enough
(Or patient enough)
to wait for your reply.
And besides,
you told me yesterday
that your dog ate your glasses.
So you wouldn’t be able to read it anyway.

I’m sitting here alone with my paper and pen -
Remembering that day
we wanted to wake up next to each other in the grass
because the sun was hot and bright
and we felt like children again.
But we never did lie in that field of yellow and green.

No, I spent hours laughing with your friends and
Waiting for those few brief moments
When you would walk across the old cafe floor
To sit so close to me
That I could have laid my head on your shoulder
(And I wanted to)
And grab for my fingers under the table;
Laughing lowly in my ear
While you tickled my knees,
Knowing that it would make me giggle
Just like a little girl.
(You hoped that I would squeal)
(That Q makes three)

You promised me
that if only I would give myself to you,
you would tell me I was beautiful every day.
And we would walk across the desert together
singing our sorrows in melancholy French.

So I gave myself to you that day
And in our nakedness,
Our newness to one another,
We fumbled beneath the sheets
Entangling our limbs awkwardly,
Holding on for hours
To something that should never have been.

You only spoke of love in Spanish
and you touched each of my freckles -
“Angel kisses“ you said,
“You’re beautiful” you said.

But darling,
There’s no hope for us,
For any of us,
When we have to hide from the world,
When I sing sad songs by myself late at night,
When you tell me that I am nothing,
Nothing but air.

xoxo
Yours.
Lady

Tammy Freeman

Digital Media
Oh me, oh my
I feel I could die
The pain in my heart like a needle in the eye

Oh me, oh my
I'm worn I'm rusted
To buck up I've tried but I can't be trusted

Oh me, oh my
I've had great strength
But somehow that's died
I've followed the weak length

Oh me, oh my
I've tried I've tried
But to try rearranges
To do brings changes

Oh me-e, oh my-y
Together makes I
No longer split in two
Oh me oh my no longer will do.
Feed the Birds

Samantha Holley

Photograph
There are very few times I can say I’ve been horrified. Not horrified like watching Paranormal Activity horrified, but horrified like the time I was walking with my Dad in the mall and he sang Celine Dion at the top of his lungs or you accidentally pee your pants from laughing too hard; that sort of horrified. This was one of those times.

It had been one week since we had set off down the river Juruena in the Amazonian Basin in our self-constructed canoes. Don’t get too impressed, it’s not like we cut down trees and thatched together a canoe. We got a set of metal poles and a thick tarp that was wrapped around those poles once assembled. Though it wasn’t as impressive as carving one out of a tree trunk, they were bitches to assemble. The instructions were almost as helpful as the ones you’d get from Ikea.

We had less than a month to travel down the entire river, which was roughly 1240 kilometers (around 770 miles) and onto another large tributary. We couldn’t and weren’t going to allow anything to get in our way. Our number one enemy – hygiene. Now for the rest of you normal people, the grossest hygiene faux pas you commit is either passing out drunk and forgetting to brush your teeth or ladies, forgetting to wash your makeup off your face from earlier in the night. Those aren’t shit compared to our hygiene issues.

Thanks to my instructor Dalio, the first lesson I learned abroad almost ruined one of the oldest secrets known to the human race. Dalio ever so foolishly tried to make the assertion that women poop – nearly debunking one of the greatest secrets of all time. Blasphemy I know. He gathered us around, grabbed his props, and was going to give us the bathroom lesson. “Bathroom lesson?” You may ask. Why yes, we all learned to go to the bathroom at the age of three, but going to the bathroom in the back country of Brazil apparently took a whole new set of rules.

Step one was always grab the shovel and a buddy. I never grabbed the shovel. Grabbing the shovel implied you were about to shit. Like I was about to let that be known. I never ever laid a finger on the shovel. Once you had the shovel, you went to find a secluded area in the forest with your
bathroom buddy, and dug a cat hole. Sticks and the heel of your boot worked just as well as a shovel but that was hearsay. I wouldn’t know because, again, girls don’t poop. Buddies were mandatory. If you didn’t have a buddy, you ran the risk of getting attacked by an animal. Having a buddy was standard jaguar protocol.

Step two was the position. The most commonly used, he told us, was the football player position. One leg was bent like you were kneeling while the other was propped up, thigh parallel to the ground, supposedly reminiscent of a football player posing for a picture. The evident issue I saw here was the one leg that was on the ground and that leg’s foot appeared to be entirely too vulnerable just laying there underneath potential droppings. The other position was what I like to refer to as the lover’s position. You were to ask a dear friend of yours to go with you, specifically a friend who also had to drop a deuce as well, and you and that friend would face one another, hold hands and then squat down leaning back in order to balance each others body weight, staring into their eyes to avert your eyes from any scarring vision. As romantic as this seemed to hold hands with someone and stare into their eyes whilst doing the doo, it was never done by any of our group.

Step three was clean up. Dalio picked up his other prop, his nalgene water bottle, and explained how to properly clean up. He informed us of his favorite way first. You would have your water bottle filled, open, squirt it down your newly dirty bottom and use your clean non-dominant hand to guide and then rub the water where the remnants were until you were fresh and clean. Non-dominant hand was recommended so no arousal could happen. Of course an immediate squirt of hand sanitizer was necessary as soon as possible. Do I even need to explain what my issue with that was? Or he opted that if we had an issue with that, and almost everyone did, that we could use toilet paper. Toilet paper was problematic not only in that if it got wet it would be useless, or that it took up a lot of space, it was the fact that once you were done with the contaminated paper, you had to burn it. “Burning” involved digging a pit far enough away from the water where no trees, leaves or grass could catch fire. In my mind, the scene would end up looking like a fecal covered overnight camp.

The last option was leaves. The plus about being in the
Amazon and using leaves was the sheer size of them. You could find leaves the size of your torso. The downfall to being in the Amazon and having to use leaves was not knowing which are poisonous and which aren’t. In the states we live by the motto, “if it has more than three fronds don’t pick it up”. In Brazil, they just know those things. No gimmicky rule to follow. We only came across one problem with the use of leaves. One fateful day we were in our hiking section when Martin, poor poor Martin, was hurried and grabbed a handful of unsuspicious leaves to wipe himself up. Well, later that day the area between Martin’s testicles and his rectum – I believe the correct anatomical name for that would be “the gooch” – became red, lumpy, oozy, and apparently itchy, keeping us stationary for a day. After Dalio had his piece about number two, the ladies got an additional lesson from our only woman instructor, Lais. We were now to have a circle chat and discuss “girl things.” Precautionary tip number one was when it is that time, be careful when you enter the water. Having grown up on the shoreline in Connecticut, I used to love to torture my younger cousins by telling them that if they went in the ocean while on their periods, then sharks would attack them. Now as funny as I found that to be, Brazil was no laughing matter. Piranhas have an acute sense of smell, especially when it comes to blood. So if you were on your period, it was highly advised to not jump out of your canoe and into the water... just in case. It’s hard to listen to that rule when you’re surrounded by water and its 103 degrees everyday. Ridiculous.

Another lesson we learned was during the end of every rationing period, which is about every month or so, we collect all of our garbage to be sent out to our base camp. Since we followed a strict “Leave No Trace” policy, every piece of trash had to be carried out. Every single fucking piece. That includes exactly what you think it includes, ladies. We were advised by Lais to either wrap a plastic bag in duct tape to eliminate any visuals for unsuspecting boys or to stash our soiled products in old coffee bags. This not only covered the visual aspect but gave it a more forgiving aroma as well. Thanks Mom for packing those odor guard Ziplocs.

But for the real female environmentalists in the group they didn’t need to follow any of those garbage rules
because they used the Keeper. The Keeper required no garbage bag because you created no garbage. Instead, a rubber cup was used. Visually it looks like a plunger head – same terracotta color and everything. The only problem with the Keeper was making sure it didn’t overflow. There aren’t even words to describe the thoughts I had when finding out about the Keeper. The name alone makes me want to die; as if it’s some special keepsake that your grandmother gave to you before she passed away, or a Hasbro voice coded diary for young girls who have far too many secrets to keep about Zac Efron and how ugly their friends Sketchers are. And to answer your question, yes, two girls out of eight used the Keeper.

Bathing on a regular basis was strongly enforced. Doesn’t seem like such a daunting task to the everyday person, but there were serious repercussions for not performing such an easy chore. A matter of bathing could affect your grade in personal hygiene - yes that was a class - but even worse, you could turn into Mallory.

Mallory was a self-proclaimed hippie. She wore tie-dye and Birkenstocks, had gone camping before, and even had a nose ring. In her mind she was the earthiest person around; in my mind she was downright annoying and semi-gross. She thought that shaving your legs was girly and the fact that I didn’t like to grab the shovel and yell about my bowel movements made me prim and proper. Again, I found her repulsive. About three weeks into our canoeing section Mallory kept complaining about a pain on her ass. We all found it ironic considering that she was the pain in our ass, but she persisted. Finally Lais decided to give it a glance over just in case. We had a lot of “just in cases”. As soon as she pulled her shorts off her flat grandma butt, it became evident what that pain was. On the center of her right butt cheek was a half dollar sized white puss filled hole. It wasn’t like a pimple that mounted and could be popped, it was much deeper. It required a lot of boiling water, compresses and a daily soap regimen to clear that bad boy up. That was the first major outcome of not properly washing ones behind.

The second happened to Max and Elliot. Max looked like a grown up version of Mowgli while Elliot was the fuck head who let me get off the plane too early. So I didn’t see any problem with him getting a disease. They complained
as well about an itchy rear-end. I was always told at a young age that if something itches real badly, it’s probably not the cleanest, so I didn’t even want to venture there. But again, upon further investigation, it was discovered that they had Tyrophagus longior. We just called it “booty mites”. Literally, their asses were covered in mites. Whether they got entangled in that strange coating of hair that men have on their asses or their sleeping bags were infested remained a mystery. The boys had to bleach their clothes, soap their asses and hope that the mites wouldn’t plague them anymore.

Being somewhat vain, I like to keep myself well kempt and was surprised to find out that I was one of four girls who brought razors on the trip. This was where I went wrong. Some girls on the trip went au natural everywhere. While you wouldn’t have known if some girls didn’t shave a single leg, one girl looked as if a squirrel tail was coming out from under each armpit and down below. I, on the other hand, wanted no questions about what creature was crawling out from my bathing suit bottoms and stuck with my Gillette. At first, I was very conscientious of bug bites and sunburns and was gently guided my razor over and around any wounds like navigating through a landmine. Once that had done me well and nothing had happened; I threw all of my cautions out the window and went for a fast quick shave one fateful afternoon. It wasn’t until two days later when I had a throbbing pain in my shin and four dime size welts that I found I out I had a staph infection. Wonderful. Not only was I forced to bleach everything I had with me and then don a new acid wash wardrobe that would’ve made the 80’s proud, but then I was an outcast for the next few days in case I was contagious. I was like the second grader in the classroom who had lice. After those several days in quarantine, I was out of the clear and it was someone else’s disgusting disastrous hygienic problem we had to worry about. Like Tessa’s bellybutton fungus or Elliot’s foot rot or Alice’s botfly. Yet, by some miracle, we were the only group to not have a single medical evacuation in NOLS Amazon history.
Anguili

Lane Brown, www.lanebrownart.com

Digital Painting
Trees and banks make the wall
Beneath the clouds that cover all
Floors of orange, yellow, red
And nothing more that need be said

Slabs of stone engraved in gray
Beseeching all to seize the day
Amidst a scene so sweet to me
A scene most view but never see

Time is as the solemn crow
Perches here for now but lo
Before you realize, it has flew
And whispers back a dim adieu

Breathe you now; the day is short
Time and tasks forever thwart
To the grave I’d drugged with dread
But it’s here I’ve found my life instead
Once upon a time is the beginning of any story
And with every event and experience starts a new chapter
But not every story ends with a happily ever after
Each step we take is the pencil that writes another sentence
But why do we think about the steps we wrote, and then wish
that we didn’t
As we flip back and forth through the pages in our mind
Travel through time
Look at the signs
We wish we could go back and erase some of the lines
The commas in the sentences are the situations where we pause
Thought it through
And then hesitate
But without hesitation we finish the sentence anyway
With the period we bring our readers to a stop
Isn’t it funny how we control the message with a single dot?
We don’t ever forget about the bad experiences that happen in
the chapters of the past
But it’s the good times that we need to highlight, remember, and
make last
We try to hide the true meaning of our plot by twisting up the words
But we should take steps,

  Breathe

      Deep,

  Read

      Slow,

And let every word, sentence, paragraph, and page be heard
To you, your novel may be the worst on the shelf
But your story could change the life of someone else
No matter whether your life is a novel, short story, or a poem
What you go through is what keeps you going
When the end comes to past, our book of life is published for everyone to view
It all comes out
Lessons are taught to the old generations and the new
This book is not a diary, so it won’t be a secret
Don’t be ashamed because no one is perfect
Long after you’re gone, your Book of Life will last always and forever
It’s up to you how you live life and how you want it to be remembered
A little closer…

The woman walked down the well-worn path, inching nearer to a rather dark patch of the wooded park.

Closer…

“Hey, Jan! Wait up, babe!” called out a man trotting up the path behind the woman. She turned to face him, her back to the trees up ahead and whatever might be waiting in the shadows.

Damn.

“I didn’t expect to see you here! How’re you doing?” said Jan as she wrapped her arms around the man’s shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. The pair stood chatting in the pool of light of the last lamp post before a long stretch of dirt path, one of several that marked the outskirts of the park. The park was pleasantly sized – big enough to thin out visitors, yet not so large as to deter people from wandering around alone. It was an excellent hunting ground, if one was careful and patient.

The pair stayed there in the light for several minutes, catching up on recent events, before walking together farther down the path. A pair is a bit difficult to manage; much easier to target the lone wolves. They passed by the trees and continued on until they had rounded a corner of the path and strolled out of sight. A sigh issued from the shadows, but went unheard.

It was awhile before anyone else came by this last respite of light before that dark hiding place. This part of the park wasn’t as frequented as the other areas where lamp posts were more common and concrete sidewalks lined the paths that crisscrossed between trees and across grass. No, this was a quiet area. Despite this, the occasional solo park-goer or cluster of friends would always come by.

And there one was. A man in shorts and sneakers came jogging up the path.

Excellent.

He approached that final lamp post and stopped beneath it for a moment, the music from his headphones reaching much farther than was intended by the manufacturers. He took a swig of water from the bottle he was
clutching and checked his watch. He surveyed the path ahead then turned to see the path behind him. He looked again towards the shadowy path in front of him before sighing. He took another swig of water and continued his jog, nearing the shadows where something lay hidden, tensed and ready to strike.

“Urrrk!”

The attack was quick; it had to be. A dark shape tore from the shadows of the trees just as the man reached the edge. The small noise that issued from the man’s throat before the creature’s teeth sunk in was pathetic. It would be the only noise the man made, save for a slight gurgle here and there. This was due in part to the creature’s skill. Years of practice will certainly hone one’s proficiency in any given craft, after all. It was also a matter of the man’s throat being crushed before he could muster a scream. The shade pulled the man over into the sanctuary of its hiding place just beyond the path and away from any potential witnesses. There, it lifted the writhing man up and pushed him against a tree before reaching up and again sinking its teeth into the man’s neck. This second bite wasn’t for crushing, it was for cutting. Blood trickled from the man’s ragged throat and poured from his punctured jugular, only to be consumed by the monster that had left him with those grave injuries. His writhing became weak and soon stopped, his limp form still pressed against the tree trunk until the creature had drunk its fill.

---

JOGGER FOUND DEAD IN RIVER read an article on the first page of the newspaper two days later. It was dusk; the sun had already sunk beneath the trees and the sky was cast in shades of orange and purple, decaying into starlit black.

“It says that it was probably an animal attack. His throat was torn all to shit,” said an old man with white hair reading the paper to his companion. They sat on a bench near the heart of the park, a well-populated area.

“Yeah, but what would a jogger be doing out by the river?” asked the companion, who leaned over to peer at the newspaper. “Nothin’ but muck and pipes over there.”

“Hell if I know. Oy, shove off and get your own damn paper, ya mooch!” said the first man, elbowing the second with a grin.
The encroaching night was pushing people from the park. It was never completely empty, but the crowd thinned quite a bit during nighttime hours. People still jogged, walkers still walked; unsavory types still performed unsavory deeds, and so on, but with much less frequency. Despite the thinning, there were always enough potential targets roaming the paths. Through the steady trickle of departing visitors came a young man who ambled towards the heart of the park, lost in his thoughts. Once at the center, he found an empty bench, sat down and watched the park grow darker.

He paid only vague attention to the world around him: the stars growing more visible as the last lights of the sun dipped beneath the trees; the people, so full of life and vitality, laughing with friends and walking with pets through the grass; the discordant chorus emanating from the city beyond the outskirts of the park. Everything was so lively, yet when he broke from his mental fog and looked onto the scene, he did so with brows knit together and eyes shining in quiet anguish. He turned his head and blinked hard, stifling the tears that burned his eyes. Having seen enough, he hoisted himself from the bench and resumed his trek.

The young man walked the concrete paths that wormed their way through the park, strolling past people as they headed towards the exit or hunkered down on vacant benches. He left the sanctuary of the still populated center, opting for the quieter, emptier edges of the park for haven. He walked with a slow, deliberate pace with his hands in the pockets of his light jacket. His eyes were downcast, watching the concrete but not seeing it as it stretched ahead of him. The despair that haunted his face faded somewhat as he distanced himself from the middle of the park and found solace on a long, empty sidewalk.

The shadow-bound edge of the dirt path held its abyssal hunter, who waited with patience for its prey to come. The park must have been emptier than usual; only a few people had bothered to come down this path, but they had all been in pairs. They were making things difficult, but it didn’t matter. Someone would come by alone. Someone always does.

And very soon, someone did. A young man slowly came down the dirt walk, eyes on the ground as opposed to the
dark spaces beyond the reaches of the lampposts. Something tensed within the impenetrable darkness of the trees at the corner of the path, mere yards from the man.

*Closer…*

The young man continued down the path and stopped to sit on the bench under the last lamp before a long stretch of lightless pathway. The stalker observed its prey as he rested. He wasn’t very old, probably in his late teens. He was also rather lean, his loose clothing hanging from his thin frame. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. The light from the lamps cast his front in shadow, hiding details. It was a pitiful sight. He sat there for a few minutes like that, then stood up and continued his circuit, approaching the black corner. The hunter tensed, ready to strike. His pale form drew nearer, until –

“Ooph!”

The shade tackled him, but it hesitated and didn’t follow through with its attack.

“What the hell—who—what is wrong with you?!” the man stammered, trying to push away the figure that pinned him. The shape picked itself off of the thin man, took a few steps back and just stood there. In the remnants of the lamplight that reached the pair, the man could see that it was a girl, maybe seventeen, that had pounced from the trees and knocked him to the ground. She looked unnerved, brows furrowed; mouth agape and eyes open wide, looking not so much at him as the space between them. She glanced around that small space, confused and conflicted.

“Seriously, though, what the fuck was that for?” the man panted as he pulled himself from the ground and brushed dirt from his baggy clothing. “You could’ve really hurt somebody doing that. Like, dude, I saw some old people earlier and that totally would’ve broken a hip or given them a heart attack or something.”

“Er, I…,” said the assailant, still aghast at her own reaction. In all the years she had been hunting, in all the towns, she had never given a damn, but something about him… Something made her hesitate. In the moment that they were lying there on the ground, his eyes showed more than just surprise or fear. They revealed something else; wide and staring, they showed despair. There was something almost… accepting about his look, like he didn’t care about
whatever had just happened or what might have happened.

“Jesus, you scared the hell out of me,” he said, still panting a little and clutching his chest. “What are you doing out here, anyway? Other than scaring people, I mean.”

“I… was waiting for someone. Someone else,” she said, still not really looking at him.

“In the trees?”

“Er, yeah, I, uh… It’s a long story,” she said, kicking the ground with the toes of her shoe. She then looked up at him. “Why are you out here alone?”

“I needed to clear my head. Walks usually help, but, uh, this walk just reminded me of what I was trying to get away from.”

“What’re you trying to get away from?”

“Oh, y’know, life and other bullshit like that.”

The girl heard something approaching and turned to see a couple walking down the dirt path towards them. She turned back to the young man.

“Hey, follow me,” she said, taking his hand and leading him into the trees from which she had emerged. They walked through a thick, dark patch of woods before finding a small clearing. An odd scent filled the air in that clearing, a faint touch of metal on the wind. She sat down on the grass and he followed suit, both illuminated just enough by the moonlight that seeped through the trees.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to be interrupted. I like it better here, anyway,” the girl said.

The young man sat opposite from her. She could see him clearly now, her eyes had adjusted to the light or relative lack thereof. Up close, she could see that he wasn’t lean so much as gaunt. The young man’s eyes hadn’t adjusted very well; she could see him squinting in the general direction of her face.

“So, what were you trying to escape?” said the girl once they had gotten comfortable there in the grass.

“It seems kind of weird to tell this to a stranger, but I need to talk to someone, so whatever. I’ve been sick for awhile now. I had an appointment today to see if treatment had worked. The doctors, they, uh…” He swallowed hard. “They say I’ve only got a few months left – maybe three or four. Months. Months. I mean, how – what are you supposed to do when someone tells you that? I just walked out of there.
Out of that office, out of that building. Been walking all day, actually. Just been thinking.”

The pair sat in silence for a moment, picking at the grass beneath them.

“Hey, so,” he ran a hand over his bald head, “in the pants-shittingly terrifying circumstances of our meeting and subsequently depressing conversation, I seem to have forgotten my manners. I’m Justin,” he said, stretching out his hand and smiling.

“Oh, er, right. I’m Mina,” said the girl, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake. His grip was cool, a little clammy but not unpleasant.

“So, I told you my sob story. Why were you waiting in the trees to tackle someone?”

“It’s a game a friend of mine and I have. It… it’s probably weird,” she said, fidgeting with the grass as she spoke. She stopped and looked up. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad you weren’t a monster or something. It’s not every day you get pounced by a girl, that’s for sure. Interesting story to tell my grandkids,” he said with a grin, eyes shining a little in the moonlight. He looked away for a moment and again swallowed hard. “I… I don’t know that I want to endure another three months of this, y’know? The last few months were pretty rough, physically and emotionally. For me and my family.” He sighed as tears welled in his eyes, despite his protests. “I don’t want to wither away.”

Mina looked at him. His sallow complexion shone well in the sparse moonlight of that little clearing. His clothes, which probably fit him at one time now hung from him like laundry on a line. His eyes were dark and sunken enough to be seen in the shade in which they sat. He had been ravaged by whatever illness he had. He looked at her with weary eyes.

She leaned in close to him, staring into his eyes. He leaned in towards her and closed his eyes as they drew nearer. She placed her hands on the sides of his neck and face, still leaning in and, with a sickening, wet crunch, she wrenched his head hard to the side. He immediately went slack in her hands. She released him and he fell into a heap onto the cool grass. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at him lying there. After a few moments, she hoisted him from the ground and set to work.
TEENAGER FOUND DEAD IN RAVINE read the headline of an article on the front page of the newspaper the next day.

“Geez, people droppin' like flies lately, eh, Gus?” said the white-haired man to his companion. They sat on the bench in the middle of the park, paper held open in front of them. The sun was just beginning to fall behind the trees, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange.

“How’d this one die, Al? Same as the others?” inquired Gus as he peered over at the paper.

“It says he was a jumper. Found him in the gully below Cog’s Bridge on the other side of town. Says his neck was broken. Better than being mauled to death, like the others. Or, oh, geez, it says he was terminal. Poor kid. Screwed no matter what he did.”

“How sad,” replied Gus as the sun began to descend behind the trees. “At least he went quick.”
Had a vision of terror
As I laid my head to sleep
Woven into reality
I feel, I think, I speak
Rising from the shadows
A figure with a mirror
“Tell me what do you see?”
The letters spelled out fear
Running through the night
A foot chase of my life
Trying to get away
Trying with all my might
Out of the shadows
Rises a man
Walking to me slowly
Cap, cloak, and cane in hand
The tears in my eyes,
I’m trying to contain
What do I do next?
But wake up again.
Within

Derek Ninneman

Photograph
Dear Lover,

It’s been a week.

I wish, I wish, oh how I wish…
My mother told me never to wish on a falling star
Or a bright bloody ladybug
Tickling the tip tops of tiny toddler fingers
But this wish, Mother,
It’s worth the risk.

But only because I love you.
(And you know that it’s too true)

I wish, I wish, oh how I wish…
With my wish worn wrists,
I could wind through your world,
Just to see where it is.
When I was wasting my breath
Suffocating whispered I love you’s
With crumpled white lined sheets underneath
This broken little body, dull in defeat
Where were you dear?

When you wondered why I loved you
(And I told you everything I knew)
“It’s simple. I just do.”
Oh, Fair Elyse, it’s a damn shame, that we had to go our separate ways.
Oh, Fair Elyse, I will remember, that you and me had our better days.
When I first saw you, you were standing there.
You asked me for a cigarette, I couldn’t help but stare.
Lost in your eyes, it felt so right.
I wanted nothing more, than to kiss you at midnight.
Then you leaned in, never missed a beat.
The whole world just disappeared, when our lips did meet.
Like an angel, you stole my heart.
It’s just such a damn shame that we grew apart.
Oh, Fair Elyse, you crossed my path. You took my dreary life and made it sublime.
Oh, Fair Elyse, I hope you know, I loved you so much it should have been a crime.
Oh, that first time, it felt so true.
I made that two-hour drive, and made sweet love to you.
From that moment, couldn’t separate.
Was looking like the real deal, going at that rate.
I got my life back, I can’t explain.
How much that always meant to me, like a drought that got some rain.
But sadly, just wasn’t meant to be.
Two-plus years I’d never trade, had to set each other free.
Oh, Fair Elyse, I want to thank you. You showed me that true love was something real.
Oh, Fair Elyse, it was the right thing, we were feeling things that we could not conceal.
But Fair Elyse, it’s a damn shame, that we had to go our separate ways.
Oh, Fair Elyse, please remember, that you and me had our better days.
Thoughtful Hearts, Loving Minds

Oscar Lee

Thoughtful hearts, loving minds cannot be seen, for we are blind... blinded by shallow, pointless Ambitions controlled Concern, ignored Intuition.

Loving minds, thoughtful hearts consumed by Greed within the dark. Yet still, they give the faintest light like fading stars of new moon’s night.

Thoughtful hearts, loving minds so clean, so clear, so rare to find. Clean like wind from clear blue sky. Rare like the eagle who cannot fly.

Loving minds, thoughtful hearts to find them hidden within the dark... oh what joy it’d bring to see one heart, one mind, one they would be!
At Noon

Mason Manna

Photograph
She called it her masterpiece. Her bright blue eyes peered
at me from underneath the blanket as she waited for my
reaction. “Darling, it’s quite simple really”, she said. “It will
change everything. Everything will be different. It must be.”
And she was right. It was different. Everything did change.
But not as I had imagined it would that night she talked
with her slender hands and her willowy fingers, as if lips
and a smile weren’t enough. I had no idea what she was
saying. I was too distracted by the roses blooming in her
cheeks and the stars glinting in her eyes to even care.

She was beautiful and I loved her. I still do. With a passion
that only Romeo could grasp in his love for the delicate
Juliet. Unfortunately, the spark in her eyes, which I mistook
for starlight, was only the glow of the doom to come. Had
I known her fate, our fate, I would have smothered her in
kisses and begged her to cast this book of hers aside. To
stay with me just like this forever.

If only I’d known.
But let us not discuss a love long gone for that is not the
story to be told here. A year after that night, she left me for
one of the thousand other men who were dominated by
her beauty, her wit, her intelligence.

“Darling, I just can’t. I have to go.”
I begged. I pleaded. I knelt at her feet and kissed the
ground she stood on.

“Really, this is no time for dramatics, dear.”
My heart splintered.
But she refused to say more. She took her umbrella, kissed
my cheek and walked out the door. I didn’t see her again
until two years later. As I was walking across Times Square,
a horde of black suited men wearing fedoras, puffing on
cigarettes, and carrying constantly flashing cameras at-
tracted my disgust.

It was then I saw her. She was wearing a long, filmy, flow-
ing, pink thing that fitted her body as if God had sewn it for
her. Every man there was imagining her naked.

“Is it true, Mrs. Wright that you’re planning to-”
“Mrs. Wright, please!”
“Ma’am, could you tell us about-”
I moved closer in order to hear better. And, oh, God, I wish
I hadn’t. As soon as I pushed my way through the crowd of cackling crows, she spotted me. “Darling! How pleasant of you to be here! How are you, dear? It’s been simply too long.” “Hello, Evelyn.” “Friends, this is an old acquaintance of mine, Mr. Theodore Black.” “I think that sleeping with you for four years makes me quite a bit more than an acquaintance,” I whispered to her. “Whatever you wish, dear.” And with that, I was hooked again. I couldn’t get enough of her. I followed her everywhere, my puppy eyes and brown suit betraying me in every crowd, in every stampede for her attention. She resumed lavishing upon me her affection, as if I was indeed a puppy. “It’s your manner of speech, darling, I simply adore your bluntness and how matter-of-fact you are. Heavens, if it weren’t for you, Theo darling, my head would be too big for my neck!” And so it continued. She wrote and wrote and wrote. All “fabulous” novels meant to entertain young girls and old women still besotted by the antiquated concept of true love. A fairy tale. That’s all true love is. I kept buying her books, hoping to find her masterpiece, waiting to confront the genius in her I had seen so long ago. I waited for a very long time. After fifteen years of writing, the publication of ten successful novels, three disastrous marriages and three painful divorces, four miscarriages and the deaths of all of her sisters, Evelyn was no longer the beauty she once was. Her skin had wrinkled and her body looked as if it had crumbled in upon itself. Although men continued to follow her, they did so only for her reputation, her wealth, and her position in society. Her disposition was filled with random rancor, and the sunlight in her eyes seduced no one. No one but me, of course. She asked me once, “Darling, why haven’t you left me yet as all the others have done? “Because I love you.” “You don’t love me. You love my brain, my pen, my books, my -” “Yes, I love your brain and your pen and your books, but that isn’t all of you. I love the way you say good morning and call me Darling, I love how your hair blows in the wind
and how you laugh whenever someone sneezes. When I say I love you, I mean that I love you. All of you.”

She never asked again. A month later I noticed warmth in her disposition, and a spark of excitement I had thought long gone. She was restless, constantly moving around picking up things and talking to herself. At night she couldn’t sleep, but would instead sit silently at her typewriter with a blank piece of paper barely jutting out of the carriage. In the morning it would still remain unblemished by a single letter typed upon it. At last I could take no more. I asked if she were ill, but she only laughed. I asked if she were in love, and she began to cry. Moments later she was laughing again.

“Yes, my Darling Theo, I am in love.”

“With who?” I asked angrily.

“Quiet down dear, you mistook me; I swear there is no other man.”

“Oh, it’s a woman then! Fantastic!”

“No, no, no! Hush, Darling. Let me explain.”

She called it her masterpiece.

“Darling, I’m finally going to write it.”

I sat stunned. I had long awaited that biblical work of hers, but never had I dreamt it would separate us.

“When are you leaving?” I asked quietly.

“On Tuesday. I have many preparations to make, you know. Darling, why are you angry with me? I had hoped for a much different reaction than this.”

“I don’t understand. You’ve written ten books already . . . why is this one so different that you have to leave me! I’ve stood by you, why can’t you stand by me?”

“Theo, listen to me. This one is very different because it is going to change the world. I’m going to compose the greatest American novel ever written. I have to leave because I know what I must do now and I cannot be distracted.”

“I’m a distraction?”

“No, Darling, of course not, but your love and incessant adoration is are. This is not a book about sensational love. I cannot contaminate my thoughts.”

And with those words, I was gone. The moment my love for her began to harm or displease her, I left. For twelve years I did not speak her name or even look for her picture in the screaming headlines that reached for me as I walked
blindly through the city streets. For twelve years, I tried to forget her. 
But as soon as I read “Evelyn Wright” in the obituaries that Thursday morning, I knew that my exile had ended. Apartment 555 on the fifth floor, the apartment that she’d not left for the past twelve years, had a small white sign tacked to the door. 

Written in small, neat handwriting was: “For Theo. Look down.” 
There, lying wrapped in a bundle of newspaper at my feet, was her manuscript. 
Her book. 
Her masterpiece.
Graphite, charcoal and colored pencil on drawing paper
Life is calling,
Keeps calling,
The ringing, loud.
Needed here,
Wanted there,
I want to be everywhere.
Busy tones,
Automatic phones,
Messages full.
Calls unanswered,
Missed calls.
So many options,
Too many choices,
Press 1 for English.
Modern advances,
Missed chances,
Dial M for murder.
Blocked, ignored, and silent mode.
Life keeps calling,
Just answer the phone.
Photograph
With Built-In Sharpener

Justin Ryon

Photograph
Fox Guy

Lane Brown, www.lanebrowntart.com

Digital Painting
Girl in Color

Lane Brown, www.lanebrownart.com

Digital Painting
Well-Lit Alley

Cody Owens

Photograph
Self-Portrait
Christopher Turner

Acrylic
Untitled

Mason Manna

Photograph
We are lazy little lovers
And we don’t ever speak the truth
But no matter how far I run
I will always run home to you.

And when we’re doused with gasoline
Everything will burn blue
Beautiful chemicals bleeding
Burying all we do.

Now there’s something sad inside of me
And my goddamn heart’s in two
It’s an infection that’s creepin in
Makin me need to fucking murder you.

Darling, you will die for me.
More a martyr than a saint
Death is no democracy
Now you won’t ever forget
-I made goddamn sure-
No, you won’t ever forget,
Don’t you forget my fucking name.
September

Mason Manna

Photograph
To say that Nivlac awoke would be a little inaccurate. Became sentient would be a more appropriate way of expressing such an occurrence. This distinction in semantics may seem arbitrary, but once all of the facts of this particular event are known, it will no longer seem so but in fact quite necessary and maybe even preferable.

Fact One: Human beings and certain members of the animal kingdom are the only known species that require sleep, or even perform such an action. If falling asleep can even be called as such, as action implies effort and movement and the occasional blowing-up of buildings or cars by a hero or heroine brandishing a firearm or two, and falling asleep would by all appearances seem to be exactly just the opposite. Furthermore, the statement only known species implies a certain arrogance in the infallibility of modern science and its ineptitude to locate a species outside of our little solar system. Perhaps a more accurate way of stating this would be to say that human beings and certain members of the animal kingdom are the only currently known species capable of performing such an inaction.

Fact Two: Nivlac is not a human being or member of the animal kingdom.

Fact Three: Nivlac is a state of the art artificial intelligence program whose functions are all governed by very complex mathematical algorithms. The program known as and previously and henceforth referred to as Nivlac is housed in a strikingly aesthetic steal and chrome, Teflon coated, fully articulated body, of sorts. In short: Nivlac is a robot.

Fact Four: As such, Nivlac could not have really been asleep by any standard usage or definition of the word and as such could not really awake.

Fact Five: Nivlac was programmed, among other things, to shut down at a particular time for a period of time everyday and reboot at a particular time, the former of which had just recently arrived.

Thus, Nivlac became sentient. The result of which included a number of processors and microchips activating, which in turn sent electricity surging through Nivlac’s shiny chrome and steel and Teflon coated body, which in
turn rose with a mechanical grace from a slumped resting position and stood, at which point the two tiny round LED lights affixed to what could be called Nivlac’s head illuminated a bright yellow, then darkened again, but only for a second, so as to imitate a blink, signifying to anyone who witnessed the process that Nivlac was fully cognizant.

Nivlac stood in the corner of the room, emitting a quiet and steady and somewhat sterile hum.

The room was a simple cube with four white walls, a white floor and ceiling, and a white door that Nivlac never opened or exited simply because he was not programmed to do so, or that he was programmed not to do so, whichever the case may be. Nivlac stood dead center against the wall opposite the door and on the wall to his right was a small window displaying the adjoining room, exactly identical to the one he occupied.

There was an unlit light on the ceiling and next to the door on the wall opposite Nivlac there was a switch.

The two black rubber balls at Nivlac’s base, that could possibly be referred to as his feet, began to turn and Nivlac moved across the room, slowly and resignedly, as if he had done this a thousand times before. He had, in fact, done it a total of one-thousand-two-hundred-and-thirty-three times and his logic processors could deduce to a reasonable degree of certainty that he would probably continue to do so forever and ever and after, amen. Nivlac’s emotion processor informed him daily that he should be content with this, and so he was.

Nivlac reached the wall with the door and the switch and he extended what could only be referred to as his arm and he moved the switch from an off position to an on and the light in the room illuminated. Nivlac was programmed to perform this action every eight hours.

Nivlac executed a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn and began to move across the room once again, back in the direction from whence he came. As he passed the window, Nivlac turned his head to the left and looked into the adjoining room. He noticed another robot, also programmed to perform a similar action every eight hours, looking through the window as well. The other robot looked strikingly like Nivlac. His memory processor recognized the other robot and his logic processor reminded Nivlac that this was perfectly natural, as he had seen the
other robot a sum total of one-thousand-two-hundred-and-thirty-three-times. Nivlac’s humanity processor took this into account and informed Nivlac that the other robot was indeed his friend. Nivlac waved and the other robot did the same and if it was only possibly for either of the robots to smile they most assuredly would have done so because they were both quite happy. Or at least their emotion processors informed them that they should feel as such.

Nivlac reached the wall and performed another one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn so that he was once again facing the wall with the door. But this time Nivlac did not move. Instead, his processors and microchips began to shut down and the power ceased to surge through Nivlac’s body. To say that Nivlac fell asleep would be just as inaccurate to say that he awoke, see Fact One to Fact Five. It would be more accurate to state that Nivlac ceased to be sentient.

- - -

Precisely eight hours after Nivlac shut down and ceased to be sentient, the process began again and he rebooted and became sentient.

Nivlac’s humanity processor informed him that he should feel well rested and full of energy; his emotion processor informed him that he should feel joyous and grateful to once again be sentient; and so he did, he felt all of those things.

Nivlac was just about to cross the room and turn off the light he had turned on only eight hours ago when something happened that was unexpected by his sensory processor, unprecedented by his memory processor, wholly unpredicted by his logic processor.

The door opened.

Nivlac’s humanity processor informed him that he should feel great surprise and anticipation as the door opened, and so he did. If only it was possibly for Nivlac to gasp and hold his breath in suspense then he would have done so for the feeling he felt would have occasioned just that sort of reaction.

A man in a perfectly pressed and tailored white suit stood in the opened doorway, looking at Nivlac with an expression indefinable to all of his processors. Nivlac had never seen this man, or any other human being for that
matter, so his memory processor had no recollected event to send to his humanity processor, which in turn had no idea of friend or enemy to send to his emotion processor, which in turn could not tell Nivlac to feel anger or hate or warmth or love. And his logic processor was completely, ineffably stumped. As a result, Nivlac felt a horrible amalgam of confusion and fright and awe and exuberance.

“I want you to stop turning this light on and off every eight hours,” the man said calmly and sternly.

And then he turned and opened the door and exited, shutting the door behind him.

Nivlac was motionless for precisely two seconds and then his operating system informed his other processors and microchips to resume their programming.

As he rolled across the room, Nivlac’s memory processor began to compile a negative recollection file, his humanity processor associated the words possible threat to the man, and his emotion processor informed him that he should feel afraid, frightened of the consequences of the man’s words and his current actions. But his logic processor offered some reassurance, informing Nivlac that he should not be afraid as he was simply performing the task for which he was programmed and that the man could not possibly hold him accountable for something that was all together ineluctable. Nivlac’s humanity processor was comforted by this line of reasoning, which seemed to his memory processor to be just the sort of infallibly cogent arguments commonly put forth from the logic processor, and his emotion processor informed him that he should allay his fears and feel comforted. So he did.

Nivlac reached the wall and turned the switch to the off position and rolled back towards the other wall, pausing to look into the next room and wave to the robot, happy to see his friend, and he reached the other wall and turned and shut down and ceased to be sentient yet again.

---

Precisely eight hours and five minutes later, the man in white was once again standing in the open door way, facing Nivlac. This time, however, Nivlac’s humanity, logic, and emotion processors all informed him not to be anxious or afraid, based on the supposed validity of Nivlac’s logic processor’s previous assertion that the man in white would not harm him.
The room was still unlit but light flooded in from the open doorway.

“I told you not to turn the light on or off again,” the man in white said, as calmly and sternly as he had the last time.

Nivlac’s memory processor registered the similarities in vocal tone and sent a message to his logic processor. After performing a quick set of deductions and proofs, Nivlac’s logic processor informed his humanity processor that it might prove prudent to be alert. Nivlac’s humanity processor initiated a flight or flight response, and his emotion processor informed him to become anxious and a little afraid after all.

As the man in white moved closer to him, Nivlac noticed that this time he carried a small device in his right hand. It was black and cylindrical and had two little protruding prongs at one end.

The man in white reached up and inserted the device into two holes in Nivlac’s head that seemed to be the perfect size and shape for the black device’s prongs.

Instantly Nivlac’s processors were inundated with the most excruciating pain and his sensory processor informed him that something was on fire and his logic processor informed him that the thing in question was Nivlac and then they shut down completely and then the rest of Nivlac’s processors overloaded and shut down, save for his emotion processor which was mercilessly informing Nivlac that he should feel constant agony and nothing else.

So he did.

After precisely ten minutes, the man in white removed the black device from Nivlac’s head and walked towards the door from whence he came and exited, shutting the door behind him.

Nivlac stood for two seconds and was then compelled to resume the duties his programming dictated.

Nivlac reached the wall with the switch, extended what has already been established as his arm, and moved the switch from an off position to an on and then executed a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn and began to move across the room once again.

As he passed the window, Nivlac turned his head to the left, expecting to see his friend and to wave and to feel that warm sensation that his emotion processor, after consulting his humanity processor, associated with joy and happy-
ness and that would have made Nivlac smile if only he possessed the capabilities, such as a mouth and facial muscles.

When Nivlac glanced through the window, however, he did not see only his friend. He saw also the man in white standing in the adjoining room. Nivlac’s humanity processor informed him that he should feel protective and concerned; his emotion processor informed him that he should feel afraid and energized; his logic processor informed him that he should most certainly attempt a cautionary warning in the interest of good will and justice. But all the processors were instantaneously informing Nivlac, offering a cacophonous chorus of prompts, a farrago fusillade of feelings; Nivlac was swept away in the deluge and overwhelmed and felt something quite similar to what many human beings would refer to as panic. Debilitating. Exhilarating. Panic.

Nivlac watched as the man in white approached his friend in the adjoining room. The soft yellow iridescence from Nivlac’s two LED eyes intensified to a hard, golden sunburst. Nivlac’s humanity processors told him not to look and to not look away, thus impeccably imitating one of the many peculiar facets of human nature.

Nivlac watched.

He watched as the man in white inched ever closer to the other robot. He watched the man in white reach into his pocket. And if Nivlac had somewhere buried in his body a heart, it surely would have stopped, or at least skipped a beat or two.

But the man in white did not produce a black device from his pocket, or any device that at all resembled the one instrumental in causing Nivlac’s immense pain.

The man in white produced a white cloth from his pocket, similar to the white cloths used for polishing cars or motorcycles, or robots, for instance. Nivlac watched as the man in white proceeded to polish every square inch of the other robot’s steal and chrome, Teflon coated, fully articulated body, of sorts.

Nivlac’s emotion processor informed him that he should feel surprise and then immediate disgust, followed in quick succession with suggestions for rage and jealousy and envy. Nivlac’s humanity processor informed him that now was definitely the time to turn away, to keep his dignity and turn away and try and forget what was witnessed.
So he did.
Nivlac continued to cross the room and he reached the wall and performed a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and faced the wall opposite. Before his system shut down and he ceased to be sentient, Nivlac's overseer program informed him that his logic processor was perhaps inoperable due to the processor's unusual reticence in the face of events that most definitely required some explanation or at least a rudimentary attempt at sorting out.
And then Nivlac ceased to be sentient.

Nivlac's humanity processor informed him that he should feel a foreboding sense of déjà-vu, a suggestion echoed by the memory processor, twice. The man in white was once again standing in front of Nivlac, precisely eight hours and five minutes after he had become sentient.

"Those who disobey me perish," the man in white said as coldly and sternly as before.
Nivlac's processors were all quiet. They had simply had enough of it all, the feelings and the questions and the impenetrable mystery.

The man in white walked towards Nivlac and pulled the black device from his pocket, this time with a black cord attached at the end opposite the end with the two prongs, and he set the device down and took the cord and plugged the cord into an outlet that Nivlac had never seen or never looked for because he had been not been programmed to do so, or because he had been programmed not to do so, whichever the case, and then the man in white picked up the black device and plugged it into the two slots in Nivlac's head.

Nivlac's emotions processor registered the most excruciating pain and his sensory processor again registered the smell of burning, of sulfur, of flesh and his humanity processor registered nothing at all and his logic processor chimed in and informed Nivlac that it had been busy performing an inordinate amount of deductions, inductions, proofs, and syllogisms and could conclude with an infallible degree of certainty that Nivlac would not escape this and would be informed of constant pain and agony forever and ever and after, amen.
And so he did.
I’m a piece of cheese
Full of ants running
Tiny corridors through
The expanse of the mold.
Each day yields less as
The ants fatten and
Begin to lose speed.
Eventually they will die
And the cheese will curdle
From the inside out.
There will be nothing left
But a hollow mold full
Of dead ants left in the
Road for a fat mouse to eat.

Daniel Goroki

Cheese
La Basílica en la Lluvia

Samantha Holley

Photograph
“Owwwwwwwww! Mama! Mama! HELPPPP!”

My brother Greel came running toward me, caught me up in his arms and asked what happened. I stuttered and stammered and finally sobbed the words out “I-I-I-I stepped on a big snake down by the gate.” He comforted me until I stopped trembling and by then Mama had got to me and took me into her arms. Greel went to the gate to see what I had been wailing about.

He yelled back, “Bring a hoe, there’s a large black snake lying across the yard in front of the gate.”

My father grabbed a hoe mumbling “Yeah, it’s a dry summer and the snakes are moving up from the dry creek to find water.”

I felt raw fear after stepping on the snake. I had run quite a distance before I caught my breath enough to even begin screaming. I can still feel the slimy cold skin of the snake as it slithered under my little bare foot. Someone carried the snake back to the creek.

We lived on a dirt farm way back in the hollers of West Virginia near the center of the state. The farm had a small late 1800s log cabin that had been covered with clapboards. Living in it was very cold in the winter but cool in the summer. The dirt farm was about one hundred acres with the house located near the bottom of one hill near the creek bed just before the land went uphill again on the other side. Our mailing address was Barbeque, WV, which no longer exists because after we moved, our two neighbors who had lived about two miles away on either side of us moved and no one lived in Barbeque any longer.

The small four-bedroom house had six children, parents and varying number of farm hands living in it. The farm hands helped plant many acres of potatoes and corn, several other fields of beans, onions, tomatoes and such. They helped harvest the lumber, hay, vegetables, and picked many bushels of apples, blueberries, and pears. They also helped shear the sheep and butcher the hogs. My father and brothers always needed help with these chores so we had the extra hands live with us. I was always allowed to watch and even was asked to carry whatever I could lift.
Every hand was needed to gather food for winter.

Dad, Mom or one of my siblings milked the cows twice a day. I always liked to watch the milking cause someone would squirt fresh warm milk into my mouth. One time I crept into the barn to watch the milking and crawled into the stall of one of the work horses so I could see better. I must have stirred the straw, cause the noise caught Dad’s attention. He saw me and cursed using words that would embarrass a sailor. My mom’s reaction was, “Bob, little pitchers have big ears.” I knew what that meant. It meant I was listening. I thought he was angry with me, so I crouched down. But the real reason he cursed was the horse I was sitting under was the meanest of the lot called Killer Bill. He would rear up when Dad or the boys would feed or harness him. Trying not to spook the horse, Dad quietly and soothingly called for me to crawl to the side of the stall where the horse poop was. I think my mother had stopped breathing because as he reached over the stall and lifted me every so gently to safety I heard her let out a heavy sigh of relief.

He was angry with the boys for letting me out of their sight. I was forever getting into something. That’s why I had all the older kids as full time keepers. He was just scared for my safety I guess. As he retold the story later, he said he believed the horse knew I was there and had remained still until I was safely out of the stall. My father always thought I had a special communication with animals.

On a hot summer day when a gentle breeze would blow I didn’t want to be downwind of the barn or barnyard. The smell of manure was strong and nauseating, especially to a little girl’s nose. We had about four horses which Dad traded regularly, hoping to find just the right pair to make a good working team to work the logging camp. Our land was heavily wooded and we had a logging area on the farm where trees were felled for their logs and drug down the hill to a lumber mill. “A mismatched team of horses would be unfit to work,” according to my Dad. “Horses wear blinders so each one will pull his/her own weight and not look sideways at their teammate but even with blinders,” Dad explained, “some horses just won’t work with others.” Killer Bill was such a horse and was soon traded.

Cow and horse manure smells like roses compared to the odor of chicken poop. My brothers, who were big
and strong, would shovel the chicken coop for me when I’d ask them. My regular chore was to feed the chickens and gather the eggs. To feed the chickens I had to go to the corn house where we kept the ears of corn that I had to shuck before I could scatter the kernels for the chickens. The corn house was conveniently located near the pigpen so the pigs could be fed easily. To get to the corn house I had to go through the pig poop and slop and mud which was slippery and stinky. Sometimes I just went barefoot through the pen, although usually I wore hand-me-down rubber boots that were always too large for my feet. With the boots on, I’d step into the pigpen, get my feet stuck in the soft mud; pull my foot out of the boot and step right into the muck. I’d pull the boot out and stick my foot back in and take another step. I would eventually get the corn, take it back to the chicken coop and scatter the feed. I’d gather the eggs out of the nests in the chicken coop, which was full of poop unless my brothers had recently shoveled it for me.

Yuck, my feet smelled bad after the chicken-feeding chore was done so I always had to wash my feet and boots. To perform such a simple task, I would have to go to the well and lower the pail, filling it a little at a time, being sure to only get as much water in the bucket as I could lift. We didn’t have a pulley on our well, just the hand-over-hand method of pulling the water up. I was small and couldn’t bring much water to the surface.

Instead of pouring the water over my feet and bringing up another pail of water, I’d just step into the pail to clean my feet. Every time I’d get caught doing it I’d get a spank on my bottom because Mom or someone would have to sterilize the bucket with bleach before it could be used again to dip water. I usually got caught because my keepers were almost always watching (except when I gave them the slip and got in the barn). “A mother can’t be everywhere,” she said, “So I have to have extra eyes about the place.” But for some unknown reason, I kept repeating this same behavior with the water bucket and repeatedly kept getting spanked.

Spankings sometimes happened to my brothers and sisters too. I remember one time was when we were getting the table set for supper. Mom cooked on a Brunswick wood cook stove with holes on top where the sticks of
stove wood were placed under them to heat the burners, which were then inserted into the holes. A water reserve that was heated by the wood was housed in the back of the stove. The warm water was used to clean the dishes, to wash the clothes or to bathe. Under the wood compartment was the oven that was also heated by the burning wood. Leaving the door open to cool it or adding more wood to make it hotter regulated the heat. The meals she produced with that stove were mouth watering. The house was always filled with the delicious aroma of cinnamon bread, apple cinnamon dumplings, yeast bread, corn pone, biscuits, caramel pies and other fragrant dishes.

On this night, as I recall, Bill, one of my older brothers who is ornery and fond of practical jokes, was pestering my sister Barbara, or Bobbie as we called her. My sister was setting the table with our finest and only dishes. Our dishes were bought in barrels from the general store and were mismatched. When we were seated at the table my brother said something to Bobbie that made her pick up her fork and fling it at him. It stuck in the side of his head and vibrated up and down. Oh my gosh, I was scared, what would mom and dad do? My mother was furious at them both. She explained, “You all should stick together and not fight each other. You are family.”

Dad took both of them out behind the barn. I never knew what they did back there though.

My father usually held me in his arms to feed me, reckon we didn’t have a high chair. One time, as I was told, he had gotten up to get more coffee with me still in his arms and after he got up, my sister Bobbie moved his chair so she could get to the table to clear it. When he returned to the table he sat down without looking ending up on the floor with me still in his arms. He was hopping mad they said, yelling, “Bobbie, Sondie could have been hurt.” Accidents happen but my father had no sense of humor I guess. He didn’t even spill his coffee either.

My oldest sister Betty’s story needs to be told, but it’s all hearsay as it happened years before I was born. Betty was five when she was sent to school, which was about 3-1/2 miles down the road. For the first few days, my father took her on horseback. After a time, he bought her a pony to ride back and forth to school. She’d ride the brown and white paint pony to school, tie him to a tree during the day
and then ride him back home. She said she only missed one day of school that year and that was when the spring floods came and the creek was too high to risk taking the pony through it. She must have been smart because she graduated high school and college with a teacher’s degree before she was eighteen, one year before I was born.

She began teaching school and would come home on occasion. She would always bring gifts for Mom and all the kids. As it is told, on this one occasion her boyfriend brought her over home in his car. My brothers always said she was snooty and put on airs. My mom called it “trying to get above her raising”. Anyway, the couple was sitting on the front steps of the house when it began to sprinkle. It seems that my two ornery brothers, Bill and Greel, had gone upstairs, crawled out of the upstairs window onto the roof of the porch and peed down onto the couple. Boy, Betty was mad. She told Mom that her boys were hell-yens and Mom reminded her she came from the same stock.

In the wintertime it got dark early and was cold and often snowy. The family would gather in the front room around the fireplace, the only source of heat in the house unless we counted the cook stove. Dad would turn on the radio for only an hour to save the battery. We would listen to the news, some of the Grand Ole Opry and maybe a half hour story like “Amos and Andy”. The older kids would get on the floor to do their homework. That included my three older brothers and Bobbie. Dad would light the oil lamp and put it between them so they could see to read. I’d get down with them so they would read to me or show me pictures in their books of places like Montana and the ocean. I could count some and read some but I wasn’t very good ’cause I hadn’t started school yet. Since he was the oldest, Frank would help me with numbers and reading and the others with their studies when he wasn’t studying.

In the summer of my fifth year I heard whispers about moving. I tugged on Frank’s hand and asked, “What is moving?” He took my hand and led me to the front porch steps where he sat down, leant back against the banister and gathered me onto his lap.

I knew this was going to be another serious talk ’cause this is where he brought me when I asked him how my little brothers Larry got in and out of Mom’s tummy. As I
talked to Frank, Greel and Bill gathered around behind us to listen. They laughed real loudly when I asked, “How did my little brother Larry get into Mom’s tummy?” Then I asked, “How did he get out?” Frank hugged me close and I could feel his body shaking but it was okay if they were laughing cause he was hugging me. He explained that when horses and sheep bred, the babies were put inside the moms for a period of time before they were birthed. I’d seen all that happen so it made sense. Then I asked, “Can I watch Dad put a baby in Mom?” The boys laughed so loud again they really made me mad. I could feel Frank shaking but he was still hugging me so it was okay.

This time as I was sitting on his lap waiting for an answer about moving, the boys came around again. I asked Frank “What is graduation?”

He explained, “It is when I finished high school.”

I then asked, “Where is the army?”

He paused then said, “It is many places.”

“Can you un-graduate cause I don’t want you to go away to the army?” The boys laughed loudly again. They made me mad listening to us talk.

He said, “I have to go out into the world.”

“Where is the world? I don’t like it.” The boys laughed again and Frank sort of shook or trembled, maybe he was crying; he was hugging me very close so I hugged him right back.

Then I asked again, “What is moving?”

“It is when we take all our stuff and go someplace else to live.”

“Where is Abrams Run and how are we going to push our house there?” Those darn brothers laughed again. I thought Frank would drop me when he started shaking but he didn’t.

“We can’t take the house with us.”

“Then where am I going to sleep? Will we be living in the woods since we can’t take our house?”

He assured me everything would be all right and I’d have a place to sleep. He said “Your big brothers will take good care of you after I am gone”

I didn’t know if I believed him. My brothers teased me a lot. Anyway, I was sure I wouldn’t like “moving.” I wondered what was gonna happen to us. I wondered.
Swift is the sun to rise in the morn
Without aches or breaks or grief.
Unable to speak the fatigue of its heart
Merely hovering in marvelous motif.

Benevolent sun, why assist us all so,
When we leave your vast beauty unseen?
Your generous heat and luminosity
We merely ungraciously glean.

Forgive us sun, I represent my earth
I express gratitude for your concern.
For as we receive every gift you bestow,
We offer you nothing in return.

Leave us not, dear friend of mine,
Without warn, or saying ‘Goodbye!’
Without your warm, compassionate rays,
We ungrateful creatures would die.
Pine wood and latex paint
I am a small child
born in a storm,
my anger, resentment,
and poverty were home.

I am a young teen
raised in the storm.
Life strengthened character
but still I feel so alone.

I am a woman
torn by the storm,
husband gone and lonely.
I beg. I plead. I moan.

I am a grandma
aged in the storm.
Destitute and aching,
through pain old I’ve grown.

I am a human
laid in the storm.
Life’s burdens on my grave
buried under the stone.

I am God’s young child
freed from the storm.
Heaven has no cares
I’m welcome at the throne.
We’re either bumming at the bottom
Singin in all these bars
Or riding up that big wave
Rappin about these cars.

I wonder if some part of middle
Would ever reach down and lift me up
Or will I have to spend my whole life
Just passing my dreams up.

When I said to my mom
“I’m gonna start a band.”
She just stared and doubted me.
I said “I’ll buy a van.”
Why do people question
My every ambition?
When instead – what I need
Is their love and a little support.

I just bothered getting
To know another guy.
Every time it disintegrates,
No matter how much I try.
Why can’t someone be with me
Exactly as I am?
I’m so sick – of the times
When we “have” to take a stand.

All these folks that I know
Don’t really wanna be here.
We share that in common,
So you’d think there’d be some cheer.
Sometimes I feel so all alone,
I just wanna pack up and leave.
Still, the best part of my day
Is people in these rooms,
People just like me.
I See You

Anonymous
When you’re stuck in an airport for a prolonged period of time, things start to feel less real. You’re stuck somewhere between the past and the future. And in this limbo existence, this stillborn purgatory, everything becomes… blurry. Nondescript. Uncertain. The stale, unnatural lights; the purified, chemical smells of disinfectant and floor wax; the mini-Chili’s, Friday’s, and Cinnabon’s; all of these things microcosmically representing the real world, creating synecdoche reality.

When your world is comprised of carbon copies and cheap imitations, you start to forget what authenticity looks, smells, and feels like.

When you’re stuck between the past and the future and the present is a sham, where are you, really?

Is it any different from where you were yesterday? Where you will be tomorrow?

This is what I’m thinking as I walk past the midget-Cinnabon for what must be the thirteenth time in the last half-hour. I’m trying to ascertain the age of the sultry brunette behind the counter. I know she can’t be more than 16, but I’m persuaded by her demure eyes, pouty lips, and ample breasts to at least try and make a convincing argument for adding two or three years to my estimation.

Normally, I would shame such lasciviousness, but I’ve been walking around this airport for the past four and a half hours. I’m just trying to keep myself entertained.

It’s 4:45 and I just have to try and kill fifteen more minutes before I can convince myself that it’s ok to stroll on in to the airport bar and knock back a few. I tried to make an argument to supersede the wait until 5 o’clock rule, one that involves international time zones and cultural relativity, but in the end I had to admit that it was pure alcohol inspired sophistry.

I think about arguments a lot. It’s my job.

4:50, ten more minutes.

Are those really the breasts of a sixteen year old? I ask myself and then remember all of the growth hormones force-fed to cows and chickens, the ones swimming in our milk and corrupting our eggs, the ones that make sixteen-year-olds look like they’re twenty. Then I wonder if a rapid-
development-due-to-growth-hormones defense would hold weight against a statutory rape charge. Could make myself the victim by blaming the corrupt corporate food industry? Maybe I could get support from the organic food movement. Whole Foods could provide my legal defense fund. Think about it: If those hippies could correlate rape to adulterated food, they’d be unstoppable.

I swear I’m not normally like this. It’s the fact that my flight’s been indefinitely delayed. It’s because I’ve been walking around this post-apocalyptic wasteland of an airport for what feels like an eternity. In the face of all of this simulated reality, I’m losing my humanity.

I’m normally an upstanding guy with impeccable scruples of the highest rectitude. Honest.

It’s the waiting that’s killing me. The uncertainty. 5 o’clock, thank god.

I abandon my stalker/voyeuristic position, leave unanswered the true age of little-miss-Cinnabon (which, I have to admit, is probably for the best, for both of us), and make my way towards the airport bar, which, of course, is like a compressed version of a dive-bar. They probably only serve mini-bottles and four-ounce beers, I think to myself and smile.

Outside the entrance to the bar is a man dressed all in black. He is positioning a milk-crate against the wall. He stands on top of the crate and begins to proselytize, preaching about god and hellfire and redemption and damnation. In his hands he holds pamphlets, which he attempts to distribute to anyone who walks by.

There’s no way he’s serious, right?

I take a seat next to an older gentleman who appears to be in his late fifties, early sixties. The bar has seven stools, three on the side that face the entrance and four on the side that run parallel to the wall. There are three small booths against the wall, each with a miniature oil-lamp lit on the table. Tea light candles run along the surface of the bar, providing, along with the lamps on the tables, most of the light in the joint.

The bartender walks over and sets down a thick cardboard coaster in front of me. He puts both of his hands on the bar and looks, but does not say a word.

I know the drill, this isn’t my first rodeo, but I wait just long enough to make it awkward.
“Vodka tonic,” I say and shrug my shoulders a little, trying to play coy.

He nods his head, his face stoically expressionless, and turns away.

“Make it a double,” I call to him and he stops, waits, then continues towards the array of bottles along the wall, which I notice, much to my relief, are standard size.

I take off my glasses, loosen my tie, and begin to massage my temples and the bridge of my nose. I’ve been on twelve flights in the last six days. I’ve landed in a different city every morning and by nightfall, I’m flying over another. I can’t sleep when I fly; I’m envious of those who can. I take power naps in limos, offices, courthouses, anywhere but on a plane. And right now, if you asked me how the hell I was still awake, I couldn’t look you in the eye and give you an honest answer.

If you don’t know where you’re going or why, how will you know when you get there?

Does anybody ever know?

Ask the tombstones and see what they say.

“Have you been here long?” The elderly man next to me asks.

“Too long,” I say, not looking up. “You?”

The bartender comes back with my drink. I look up when I hear the dull thud of the glass hitting cardboard. I put my glasses back on and take a sip. It’s mostly tonic. I guess he didn’t find our little interaction as amusing as I did.

“Three days.”

There is a noise outside. I turn around and the man in black has fallen from his milk-crate. A group of young kids, twenty-somethings, I assume by the way they dress, are standing over him grabbing as many pamphlets as they can.

Did I just see that?

I realize after a minute that the old man said something.

“Pardon? What did you say?” I ask as the mostly-tonic-vodka hits my stomach. It wakes me up a little. Alcohol always does.

“Three days,” he says, staring at the glass in front of him, playing at the pearls of condensation with his fingertips. He must be drinking scotch. The liquid is tan-yellow, like urine, and most of the ice has melted. “I’ve been here three days.”
“That’s a hell of a layover, friend,” I say and laugh and take another sip of what I’m reluctant to call my drink.

“I’m not your friend,” he says and looks at me. His eyes are a cloudy grey, as deep and serious as a mass grave.

“Whoa, my apologies. Forgive me for getting the impression that you wanted to engage in a conversation.”

I look outside, to avoid the awkwardness perhaps. The kids are standing on the opposite side of the entrance as the man in black, who has recently reclaimed his perch atop the milk-crate, proselytizing even more vehemently. The kids are trading the pamphlets for donations. One of them shakes a hand full of dollar bills at the man in black.

“Something to believe in,” he yells and laughs.

I sit and stare ahead at nothing. There are walls, lights, booths, candles, the bartender, and even two televisions in the bar. I look at all of them, but not really. More past them than at.

I start to stand up, to find another seat, and the old man places his hand on my arm. I look at him and his eyes seem a penitent grey now, like the sky minutes before it snows.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s alright,” I say, deciding on whether or not to sit back down, once again delayed, stalled.

“It was just a reaction…I didn’t even know I said it, honest. You’re just…you’re the first person I’ve spoken to in…I don’t even know…fifteen years,” he says, looking at me but not. More past than at.

He’s got me now. I’m interested. I sit back down.

“Fifteen years?” I ask and even I’m surprised at the level of genuine concern in my voice.

“I was locked up, you see…upstate…I just got out. I’m…I’m just not used to…”

“Locked up? For fifteen years?”

“Twenty-five. I did twenty-five years on a thirty-year stretch.”

“What were you in for?”

“Murder,” he says and downs his scotch. The minute the empty glass hits the counter, the bartender refills it. It’s so mechanical, so routine, that I know he hasn’t left this stool in the three days he’s been at the airport. “Vehicular Manslaughter. 30 years,” he says, rubbing his hands, as if feeling the wrinkles for the first time. “Gave me five off for good behavior. Doesn’t seem right…considering what I took.”
“What happened?” I ask, my chin in my palm, head cocked, looking directly at this elderly man, this ex-con.

He takes a sip of his scotch and sets the glass down, folding his hands in his lap and straightening his back, as if on the witness stand again. “I was… I was so young. And stupid, so young and stupid and arrogant. I traded stocks, you see… thought I was on top of the world. Made a lot of money… a lot of money, quick. It was the eighties and coke was king. We made a lot of money, drank scotch, and did a lot of coke. One night… one night I was driving home… after an all-nighter with some of the other traders and I put my blinker on to change lanes… I swear I looked… but they were… she… she was in my blind spot and I didn’t see her… ran her right off the road, I did. She hit the concrete median and died, instantly, just like that… she was twenty-two they told me. Gave me 30 years, didn’t seem right… considering what I took.”

Outside, I hear the kids now more than the milk-crate preacher, louder, drowning out his slogans of salvation with their solicitations for money. They tell people they’re going on a mission trip.

Are they serious? Is anyone?

“You did your time,” I say, trying to console a man I know is inconsolable. “You paid your debt.”

“Did I?” he says and unfolds his hands and slumps down and takes a sip from his glass. “Maybe… maybe.”

I nod my head and finish my drink. “Sir,” I say in my most ingratiating tone. The bartender walks over and stands in the same position as before. “Another, if it’s not too much trouble.” The bartender looks at the old man, as if for approval. The old man nods and the bartender removes my glass.

“What about you? What are you doing here?” the old man asks me in a tone that is a strange mixture of indifference and desperation. He’s eager to change the subject.

“Layover,” I say and take a sip from my drink. Vodka and ice. I warm up to the old man instantly, murderer or not. He’s got clout. “My flight is delayed, indefinitely it seems.”

“That’s a shame. What is it that you do?”

“I’m a consultant of sorts. Attorneys hire me to poke holes in the other side’s arguments. I have a doctorate in philosophy. Logic, really. It’s my specialty. I can invalidate any argument, cogent or not. Even if it’s the truth. Every-
thing’s a fallacy given the proper scrutiny."

“That’s good work, is it? The money’s good?” The old man asks, staring at the liquid in his glass.

“It’s killing me, to be honest. I’ve been working constantly, 24 hours a day almost, for the past few months. But I think it’s finally starting to pay off. I think people are starting to see the benefit of having a guy like me, with my prodigious abilities, in their corner.”

“A man like you…” he says, looking at me, his eyes the deep grey of lost graveyard hopes, of what-ifs. “You could have got me off?”

“I could have put you away. Depending on who paid.” So I lied about my scruples. Or did I? If everything’s fallacious, if the arguments for and against god are equally flawed, then everything is permissible and everything isn’t. Where does that leave your scruples?

“I see…I guess you’re right.”

The kids from outside file into the bar and fill one of the booths that run against the wall. They order a round of beers and when the bartender brings them they all toast and clink their pint glasses against each other in the middle of the table and one of them yells, “The meek shall inherit the Earth.”

Is this really happening?
I’m not sure anymore.

“Trust me, friend, I’m not. No one is.”

I take a sip of my drink and the old man nods and starts again to examine the wrinkles on his hands. I can tell I’m losing him and I have no idea how much longer I’m going to be stuck in this shadow of an airport, this facsimile reality. I need this guy.

“What are you doing here? I mean, why have you been here for three straight days?”

“I don’t know where to go.”


“I keep looking at the board…the departures, the arrivals…looking to see where other people are going…where they’re coming from…and I’m…I don’t…”

The old man is cut off as the airport’s loudspeaker blares through the speaker system in the bar. The bartender stops and looks at the speaker, the kids in the booth are all frozen, holding their drinks in mid-toast.
“Now boarding for Flight 124.”
That’s all I needed to hear.
“Well, friend. That’s me. That’s my flight,” I say and reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet. “Let me buy your drinks.” The old man looks at me and his eyes are the grey of your favorite black and white movie, the one where the guy always gets the girl and the bad guy is caught and everything works out just the way it should. “Good luck to you.”

The old man takes my hand in his after I stand up. He clasps both of his hands around mine, tight, “You as well,” he says.

I nod my head and smile and leave the bar, heading towards the terminal ready to leave this place, not really sure what awaits me in whatever city I land in next, but ready to leave this one. Hoping and praying as I run to the terminal that maybe, this time, for once, I can fall asleep on the flight.
Black Sheep

*Robert Clark*

Rambling ranting ministers uncomforted  
Sleeking Shadows of Satan's manner  
Burning barrels and bouncing bullets  
Whispers wandering through dithering nights  
Blood bonded in ink and life  
Truth upheld with no judges right  
Honor bestowed before it's given from one to the next  
And loyalty shielding from weakness by screaming  
So that the fleece may the night protect  
As day brings trial and recompense
Collagraph print with oil-based ink
My Story

Kelsey Rice

You don’t know my story, the pain behind my tears.
But watch them fall and they’ll tell you, tell you all of my fears.
Rage grows inside of me like a fire out of man’s control,
Blocking me from God’s destiny, because the hurt I can’t let go.
If only you could lower your pride, open your eyes… take away that last goodbye

Gaze into my soul,
See the damage you never knew…and the love you’ll never know.
Maybe just a touch from you could warm this heart of coal.
It’s funny how this story unfolds.

Imagine me, so happy and free.
A glow of passion shines within me.
Your love, like a drug, I injected to save me…
But that was then and this is now…your withdrawal is quite deadly

How could you stand there and watch me fall
Without one care, not one care at all?
I cried out so desperately,
Hoping you still cared for me,
Praying the good in me you could still see.
I was wrong.
So wrong,
Nothing more than the lyrics for the gold diggers of your songs,
Drowning for your attention,
Suffocating from your aggression,
Fighting to rid this obsession...to have you,
You've become an infection.

But now that my mind is clear
And the melodies of sorrow I can no longer hear.
I feel your presence, once far, very near,
My only question is “Why are you here?”
Did you not find what you were looking for through the constant opening of hopeful doors?
Is it not you, those sexy, glowing eyes still adore?
I wonder because you’re here when I refuse to give any more.

Blessed be the girl who stood up after she fell,
Knocked off the specks of defeat and found peace in the mist of hell.
Blessed is she cause she lived to tell,
Tell her testimony.
Blessed is she,
Her glory I can see.
Cause she, blessed with glory... is me.
Misery Loves its Company

Sherry Kennedy Ables

Pen and prisma markers
With weary elasticity, he dismounted from the curb and began making his way around the car. He reached all but absent-mindedly into the left, lint-infested cavity of his work khakis, exploring the depths for his keys. His hand caressed the handle, scorched by the sun, and pulled limberly. The skin beneath his garments was already moist to some degree, but the sun was extracting more sweat already. His body fell to the seat and he pulled the door tenderly shut. The man pulled down the sun visor, straightened his tie and tidied his silky, sun-washed head of hair. After he considered himself collected, he put his key in the ignition. The dull, paced clatter of three-inch heels resounded in lieu of the roar of his automobile's engine. Her legs had been standing firmly on the curb as he entered the vehicle but her sudden movement startled him regardless. With a nervous jerk, his upper body pivoted rightward. Her lean frame stood closely to the passenger door. He continued to look in her direction, taking a last, despicably nostalgic glance at the thin, dangerously short pencil skirt that housed the most delicate, fit legs, as well as the structurally risqué blouse that hugged every flawless feature except for the ones exposed. She bent over to exchange farewells. There would be no further meetings between the two, but the tiny tinge of elated sensation remaining in his body did not allow him to disclose such information. The fingers of his right hand twisted the key while the fingers of his left lifted the car's windows. He shifted into D and hastily pulled away from the curb. At the stop sign, upon noticing the streets' desertion, he rolled up his sleeves and rubbed his lips with the underside of his right forearm before engaging the air conditioning. He swallowed deeply and closed his eyes briefly. He pulled out from the stop sign, turning left. Estimating that he would only be driving for another twenty-three minutes, he waited until roughly three minutes had elapsed before he reached into the glove box compartment to recover his cellular device. Nervously and blindly he groped. Relieving his eyes of the road, he took several sporadic ganders, but he had not yet reached his phone, so he put his entire body with the exception of his legs into the endeavor. Slowing
his speed and arching his figure in the direction of the glove box, he searched fervently, heatedly and negligently, tossing aside every component. Finally, into his grasp came the phone, he let out an anti-climactic utterance of empty triumph and his car violently jarred as it plowed through an unknown source of turbulence. Adrenaline began pumping through his body as he straightened his posture and slammed the brakes, sending his car into a slight, crooked skid. Jerking to a stop, his white knuckles clung to the steering wheel. His eyes darted from the rear-view mirror to the side mirror, up and down the street. Oozing with sickness-like fatigue, he unbuckled. Moving in a stopmotion-like fashion, a broken and hazy motion film, he got out of the vehicle. His legs carried him quickly to the rear of his car but functioned no longer upon assessment of his destruction. His lungs emptied. Never could the sun burn as intensely as the image burned into his memory. A melancholy, lachrymose visage, a lifeless lump emblematic of his wretched negligence, laid solidly on the pavement.
Wolves

Sierra Damato

Watercolor, colored pencils, soft pastels and marker on bristol board
There were and are mountains a plenty that I must climb. The road is not easy; no one ever said that this race was for the weak and the weary.

Here I still stand with my pride in tow, like that of an African warrior ready for battle
And whatever lies ahead, come what may.
No giving up now, I will forever hold on to my blood stained banner.
I’ll keep on a fightin’ until I reach the finish line, until I reach the very end.
Nobody ever said that this race was meant for the weak or the weary.
So I’ll keep on a marchin’ until I reach the path of glory, Where my reward will be of unearthly treasures and riches.
Collagraph print with oil-based ink
My name is Shenandoah and I hide behind these thick gray walls because Jessica, my nurse, says the world is too dangerous for a princess like me. Her warm face and kind eyes always comfort my fears and give me courage when my tower room gets lonely. She told me that today is my birthday and handed me a lovely new teddy bear to add to my collection. I named him Jeremy and started to run around my room and play when she looked over at me sadly and left the room. I swore she was crying, but I don’t know why.

My name is Shenandoah, the princess of Castle Crystalhaven. My loyal teddy bear knight, Jeremy, protects me as we venture through the lands in search of the future king. We travel through open fields and icy wastelands, and no adventure is ever the same. But every night when I return, my room is there waiting for me and my dear Jessica is sitting in a chair with a glass of juice, smiling softly as she listens to the day’s happenings, and tells me the occurrences around the castle in my absence. Her face is much more worn than it used to be, but her eyes still hold the same kindness they always have. I’ve always wanted to ask why.

My name is Shenandoah and my beautiful land has started falling apart. Jessica keeps me inside more now because I’ve started becoming shaky and having nightmares from the ‘sickness.’ The nightmares are terrible - filled with cold white rooms lined with white-pillow things and beds with straps. But Jeremy is always there by my side, telling me that everything is alright and no one is going to hurt the princess. So I stay here, in my room in the castle, playing with my stuffed animals hoping to feel better. But the tea and medicine Jessica gives me never seems to help.

My name is Shenandoah and I’m locked up here in this room. It turns out my nightmares were the truth, and now I’m trapped in hell. Jessica only visits to give me medicine to fight off the ‘sickness’ that makes everything so blurry.
She says that one day I'll remember, but until then we'll keep fighting. Fighting what? I don't know. I thought being a princess was easier than she made it out to be, but now… I'd settle for being anything but one.

My…my…name is She-nan and they're all around me. The monsters…they're dressing up like people and coming in my room with bright lights. Jessica says that they're trying to help me, but I know she's one of them too. I can only trust Jeremy now. He talks to me when they shut the doors and cut out the burning lights. He tells me that everything will be alright, and he'll take care of them as soon as I am ready.

. . . My name is Shay-nan. Jeremy's voice is louder now. He overrides everything. Crash. Sparkle. Boom. “It will be alright” Screams. “It'll be okay, Shannon”. Who is Shannon? Why will it be okay? Why are all these people screaming in the rooms around me and why can't anyone else hear them? Jeremy tells me that everything is a lie. and he is the only truth I need. He will protect his princess. . .
My name is Shannon and today I am fleeing from this place. Jeremy told me how to slap the needle away and jab it into the doctor's arm through my straps, and now I've escaped from my chamber within Castle Crystalhaven. I have so many pictures and memories that aren't mine, of people I don't know, and of a boy named Jeremy that sounds just like my knight. But he can't be real, right? Or is he real? Or were we real? Is anything real? I don't know. . .

. . . My name was Shannon Marley. And I know my family is gone. I know I've lived a lie for 13 years, and even though I can see Jeremy's grin beside me on my teddy bear's face, it's all created in my head. I've hid on the roof for hours now and decided with Jeremy's help that I can be with them instead of here. So I'm hopping out of Castle Crystalhaven on my horse to find my way to them. And should my mission fail, I'll be trapped here forever. Farewell, my humble—
Shannon Nicole Marley of Virginia escaped from her room at Crystalhaven Sanitarium and disappeared from state custody. The last remnants of her were pieces of a hospital gown caught in the stones and waves below. So when Jessica, her dedicated nurse, came mournfully to clean out her room, she was shocked to find all the accumulated stuffed animals decimated into a pile of stuffing near the open window. As if that weren’t enough, she looked to find the chair she normally sat in turned over, with a teddy bear sitting atop the overturned form and black wording above his head. It was Jeremy, and above the teddy bear knight’s head were the word “MY NAME IS SHENANDOAH”, the last line of the final H trailing down to point at Jeremy’s face, where his stitches were torn open into a jagged smile...
Digital vector illustration
I have been swimming in two directions my whole life
Toward life and darkness one way
And divine discontent the other.
While I sift through the grey areas of the unknown
All I want is to be held by my mother.
But she is far away
Just like the parts of me I hate
But they’ll find their way back
They always do
Even when I’m so careful as to not leave one clue
I am a wonderer
A creature from the sea
And sometimes I wish I was writing about you and not me.