

*K*ANADU



2022

XANADU

**“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about
creating yourself”**

George Bernard Shaw

**Doane University
Literary Magazine
2022**

Xanadu is the student literary magazine of Doane University, Crete Campus. Published continually since 1956, the magazine is edited by members of the student body.

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A Letter from the Editor. . .

Dear Doane Community,

It is my great pleasure to be writing my final letter from the editor for Xanadu and my official farewell to Doane University. For the past five years I have been involved with Xanadu, first as assistant editor, then co-editor, and for the past three years, the chief editor. Throughout all this time, Xanadu has never been easy. Of course, no one ever said it would be. I've seen three different faculty advisors in my time on Xanadu and countless interchanging staff members. Still, Xanadu in and of itself has been a delightful constant in my life and I would never give it up for anything.

In my mind, Xanadu is a hidden gem in Doane's crown. While we may not be widely known or wildly famous around campus, I believe we are vital to Doane's personality. We create a space that is free for creation. We exist as a place for students to creatively express themselves without prompts, guidelines, grades, or rules from anyone. To me, there is nothing more important than the creative freedom Xanadu provides.

There is a bittersweet tone ringing in my heart knowing that this is my final year. However, I am pleased and honored to pass on this responsibility to such capable future editors. I can't wait to see what the future has in store for Xanadu and I have every faith that it is in good hands.

Much love to you and yours,

Jean Chevalier
Xanadu Editor
Spring, 2022

Dear readers,

We are excited to share The New Xanadu magazine from 2022 with you. We hope you enjoy browsing through the pages and enjoying the works that individuals across campus poured their hearts into.

Although this publication is being released later than planned, it does not change the quality of content and the dedication put into it. We would like to thank everyone who submitted works for the magazine and thank you for waiting patiently to see it.

Working as an editorial team for this magazine, we relished in revisiting the pieces within these pages, and we are anxious to see what people have to offer to the 2023 issue, to be released in the spring.

Again, thank you for your patience, and we hope you are as pleased with this magazine as we are. See you in the spring!

Abrianna Miller
The New Xanadu Editor
Jessica Himmelberg
The New Xanadu Assistant Editor

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Jeremy Caldwell

Dear Jeremy (Found poem from rejection letters)

We very much appreciate getting the chance to read your work.
We understand how much work goes into creating and submitting your pieces.
Our team did spend some time looking at them and we did like them.
Your poems are very good, we enjoyed reading them, and they made it through our entire reading process.
So, good job!

But we've decided against holding it for our second round of deliberations.
We regret further that we are unable to give you feedback in detail.
Unfortunately, we have decided it is not the right fit for us.
Unfortunately, they do not fit our current editorial needs.
Unfortunately, the piece is not for us.
We're not keeping them.

It is always a tough call.
As writers, we understand how difficult this process is.
We've received many rejections ourselves; we know it's never easy.
We'd like you to know it is not a reflection on you as a writer, but . . .

Good luck with your writing and thank you for your interest.
Please think of us again in the future.
We wouldn't exist without your writing.
We wouldn't exist without you.

Sincerely,
Best of luck

Jean Chevalier

Lights in my Eyes

My eyes are closed deliberately and tightly. As far as I can tell, I'm sitting cross legged on what feels like carpet. I can strongly feel and barely see through my eyelids a bright light above me like a spotlight on a stage that is gently warming the top of my scalp and the bridge and tip of my nose. I can't taste anything on the air, hear anything, smell anything, or feel anything but the floor beneath me. Is it over? Did I do it? I can't be sure until I open my eyes. I can't do that. There is something to opening one's eyes. A sense of conclusion. If I open my eyes, this feeling of existing in between worlds is over and I won't be able to get it back. I want to live in this moment forever, this warmth, like the final most comfortable moments wrapped up in a quilt just before falling asleep. Still, it has to happen eventually. I won't do it, not just now. Instead, I begin to sing a favorite old song from when I was a little girl in my head. *Starry, starry night. Paint your palette blue and gray. Look out on a summer's day with eyes that know the darkness in my soul. Shadows on the hills. Sketch the trees and the daffodils. Catch the breeze and the winter chills in colors on the snowy linen land.*

"Stop doing that to yourself. You won't comfort yourself at all with a song like that." A male voice startles me. I still won't open my eyes.

"Who is that?" The sound of my own voice shaking me a bit like the first time you speak out loud in the morning after waking up.

"Open your eyes, you might find out," the voice replies.

I defiantly but slowly shake my head. "No. I—I don't want to."

"You have to open them sometime, Rose," the voice says. "And I have a long time to wait, you know." I can almost hear a smile. The voice is familiar—a very distant familiarity like a long forgotten memory or a song that I hadn't heard in years. Still, I don't want to open my eyes and I won't do it for anything.

"No. Why should I? I don't even know who you are." The words escape my mouth sharply and definitively.

"Rose, come on. Of course you know me," the voice says. "Your curiosity is going to get to you eventually."

"I don't want to. I want to stay like this forever," I reply.

"Do you?" he asks. "Are you sure? I've been exactly where you are now. I know what you're feeling. You aren't comfortable, *you're scared.*"

I don't reply. He's right. I *am* scared. I would have to open my eyes eventually either out of curiosity or just plain boredom. First I place my hands gently over my face. Finally and slowly, I open my eyes, rapidly blinking a couple times making my eyelashes flutter. At first I don't see anything but my own hands, a light just barely peeking in on my face in between each finger. I hold my hands out a bit further from my face and look at my palms. They don't look any different. I put them together and haltingly feel them, twisting and turning them around like I am washing them without water or soap. They feel normal. I delicately touch my face. It feels normal. I feel my hair, the base of my neck, my shoulders. Everything feels as it usually does. I don't really know where I am. It just looks like distant

Christmas lights all around me with no visible end. I look up and squint at the light that I had felt keeping me warm. Instinctively, I reach up to touch something—some source that the light may be coming from. There is nothing there. Suddenly, I remember the voice that had convinced me to open my eyes in the first place. I don't see anyone.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"Behind you," the voice replies.

I stay seated on the floor and turn around on my hips to see a smiling face that I know but haven't seen in many years. He doesn't look any different from the last time I'd seen him. He's sitting the same way I am. His blonde hair is still as shaggy and unkempt as ever. He is wearing a messy, torn pair of light blue jeans and a dark navy blue t-shirt with a galaxy printed on it. In his left hand, he holds a chain that is connected to a brass pocket watch in his right hand. He had always had a thing for them, carrying them around with him everywhere he went. His tennis shoes are still as dirty as ever. I don't understand how this could be possible.

"Roland? What are you doing here?" I ask.

"What do you think? Who else would be here after you pulled something like that?" he replies. "What were you thinking?"

I look down at my shoes, realizing why I'm there and what happened. "I don't expect you to approve but I *know* you understand."

"Well of course I *understand*. I just never thought that you would actually do this," he says. "You *said* you would never do this. I *heard* you when you made that promise, Rose."

"So you *were* listening." I can't help but grin a little. He doesn't smile back. "I'm sorry, but you can understand why hearing that might be a little comforting. I was never sure whether or not you could actually hear me after all."

"I think you're just trying to change the subject," he says.

"Oh please, Roland. I have a right to ask some questions," I argue.

"Rose," he interrupts. "Don't you get it? Your questions don't really matter anymore.

Nothing does."

I shrug. "Maybe that's for the best."

"For the best?" he asks. "Would you stop trying to make this sound like something to be happy about? God, our entire generation keeps doing this. *Glorifying* death. Unbelievable."

My spine shivers and I dry swallow my own breath. That word; death. That is what this is. I had known that's what all of this is but the word hadn't actually been said. I'm not just sleeping or dreaming, I'm *dead*. I shake it off. I want to argue with him. He always loved to argue and he's been gone for so long that anything I can get out of him, even an argument, would be a treat. "Well no one—especially you I might add—can exactly deny that there are some attractive features to death. I get to see you again after all."

"Do you really think that seeing me is worth ending everything?" he asks.

"Well not when you put it that way..."

"God, Rose! I can't believe you did this! You promised you never would. You promised that *because of me* you would never do this." He puts his pocket watch and chain into his front pocket and rubs the back of his neck. He won't look me in the eyes.

"You know, you're not exactly the best person to be judging me on this." I throw my words at him. "You did the same thing."

"Which makes me the perfect person to do just that," he debates. "You taught me to seize the day once. Is that what you're doing here? Seizing the day by doing this?"

"That was years ago, Roland." I lean forward and put my hands on my head. "You can't honestly tell me that things haven't gotten better for you since it all happened?"

He shakes his head and sighs. "Well, I don't have to pay bills. I'm not stuck in that damn wheelchair anymore. I don't have to face any heartbreak or anything like that. I don't have to take anymore meds for my mind or anything. I'm not in pain."

"Good." I interject sharply. "Sorry, I just...it always helped to tell myself exactly that. That you weren't in pain anymore."

"You're right, Rose. I'm not. I don't have to deal with pain anymore but I also don't get to deal with everything else. *Anything* else. I don't get to see you anymore, you or anyone else, any of our other friends or my family. I don't get to listen to music anymore or watch my favorite movies or TV shows. I don't get to go on dates or to concerts. I don't get to go down to the river like we used to. I don't get to *live* anymore," he says.

"I couldn't hear you anymore, Roland," I interrupt. "I couldn't remember the sound of your voice, isn't that insane? It's all I used to hear for hours on end almost every day. I used to love making you laugh but I couldn't hear that laugh anymore. I didn't think I ever would again. You always thought nothing came after life. I kept thinking, trying *so hard* to reach into the back of my mind to see if there was just some small bit of your voice remaining. It just wasn't there anymore. I didn't remember the sound of your voice, I didn't remember what you smelled like, what you felt like. Just ten years and it all started to fade away. Do you know what that felt like? Do you *know* what you did to me?" I say, the words rushing out of my mouth like a waterfall releasing everything I've wanted to say to him for so many years.

"You were always stronger than me," he says.

"Apparently, that isn't the case!" I argue. "Apparently I wasn't so strong after all." I can feel my eyes start to make tears. I hold them back as best as I can, a deeply strained pain developing in my throat as I do. I had never cried in front of him when he was still around in life, I'm not about to now.

"You don't have to do that," he says.

"Do what?" I ask.

"Hold the tears back. I've seen you cry a million times in the past ten years. It hurts me every time and isn't exactly something I would forget. Especially since so many of those tears were my fault." He looks down at his open palms as if he had physically crafted my tears with them.

"I don't blame you," I whisper.

"I know you don't."

"So then why are you blaming me?" I ask.

"Because, Rose. You've seen the aftermath. What it does to people. Do you want to see what you're doing is going to do to the people *you* left?"

"They're probably better off," I reply coldly.

"Oh please," he scoffs. "Were *you* better off?"

I don't say anything. There is nothing I *can* say. I missed him like crazy in those ten years. I missed his ridiculous sense of humor and the way that he could turn any small talk into a full-fledged complex conversation. I even missed how incredibly argumentative and belligerent he could be at times. I wasn't better off. Would the people I was leaving behind truly be better off? It was difficult to think about. "I don't know. Like you said; it doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Well, it might matter a little bit," he says looking up at the light above me.

"What is that light anyways?" I ask.

"You'll find out," he says.

The two of us sit in silence for a while. What can I say to him? For ten years I've been amassing questions for him, thinking of nothing but what I would say to him if I got the chance to see him just one last time. Now that there was an eternity for us, I have nothing to say. The concept of an eternity seems to stop everything in its tracks. "So what happens now?" I ask.

"Hard to say. I can't really tell what's happening outside so now we just wait," he replies.

"Outside? What do you mean?" I ask him while looking around to see any sort of indication that we were inside at all.

"Yeah, you see all these things that look like string lights?" He gestures all around us.

"Yes. What are those?" I ask.

"They're like the light above you. Everyone has their own light," he explains. "Once I found out what you had done I decided to wait here under yours to try and knock some sense into you. Too bad you're just about as stubborn as I am."

I smile at him and let a weak chuckle escape me. "Nice to know that you still think about me," I tell him. He smiles and shrugs.

"Of course. I mean, you still think about me. Why shouldn't it be the other way around? I think about everyone," he sighs. "I wish I could talk to you all just one more time, you know? Just five more minutes. A note can never really cover it all. Suicide should require a full personal narrative, a novella at least."

I nod and smile. "There is never enough time."

"No," he agrees. "There isn't. At least not for me."

"What about me?" I ask.

"You need to let go. Let go of me, all that pain, everything that brought you up to this point. It isn't doing you any good and damn it Rose, I don't want to see you again for another sixty years at *least*, got it?" he says.

"Wait, I'm confused. What do you mean?" I ask. The light above me starts to flicker and then grow brighter. "What's happening?"

"Before you go, just know that I'm sorry. I miss you. All of you. I'll see you when it's *actually* your time to be here, alright?" he says.

"No—I—wait a minute. Roland..." I can feel a strange tugging sensation in my stomach. "What is this, what's going on?" I don't understand why I feel the need to ask. I know what is happening. I'm going back. I look into his eyes, he is finally looking right at me. I get one last good look at his face. "I have to tell you before I go..."

"Yeah?" he says.

“I forgive—”

• • •

My eyes are closed. I can see a light through my eyelids. This time, I can hear. There are panicked footsteps and voices all around me. The smell of cleaning supplies pierces my nostrils, rudely awakening them. I can sense the unmistakable taste of hospital on my tongue. I feel what is beneath me; a gurney. This time I don't hesitate to open my eyes. As I do I am blinded by a bright light just above me and I take a deep and sudden gasp of air which inflates my lungs to their full capacity as if I had been submerged in some dark lake and just barely broke from the surface. I look around to see people in scrubs staring at me. “She's coming to!” one of them yells. I realize that one of the people surrounding me is my mother. She grabs my hand and squeezes it so hard I think she may be trying to break it. “Baby? Can you hear me? Please come back to us!” she yells to me. I can't seem to speak. My father is standing next to her. “Rose? *ROSE!*” he calls out. “Come on, kiddo, wake up.” I try to force words out but nothing comes out but a broken squeaking noise that transitions into sobbing. It would seem that those pills didn't actually work like I thought they had. I suppose I have a little longer to go before I can go back to that light.

Doug Christensen

Footprints

The footprints we leave....

If you would walk with me, take my hand.

If you would sit with me, touch me and be fully present.

If you would look at me, see me and look beyond my eyes.

If you would talk with me, be honest and be your real self....it is safe.....

If you would claim me as friend, know me, know my heart, and feel my soul.

Let my footprints be found with yours....in front when I need to lead.....behind when I need to

follow your lead;beside when I need to be with you.

Always, hold my hand when we cross the streets of our lives....when we need to know that we are

there for each other.

My footprints are my life but not my legacy.....they account for the time I have spent on this earth.

I don't get to decide my legacy, others will do that.

I do however, get to decide where I leave my footprints, how large a stride I take, how deep my

prints will be and the direction they will head

Others will look at them and decide.

I can only walk where my heart and my head decide.

I can't get caught up with my legacy.....if I try to build it, I will end up doing only those things that

will be noticed, those things that have greatest chance for success, those things that

have the chance to focus the spotlight on me.

There is work to be done that is not work that others may even know about but if that work is not

done, others will definitely notice the space left from what is undone.....

Growing Older

I don't like growing old, or should I say "older."
We all do this. We all share similar journeys.
So, why do I at times feel so alone as I walk my path.
I often wonder, where to from here?
I can still do things, make contributions....be important to something
or someone.
Age may have diminished some of my physical abilities and there are
some things I no longer want
to do, even if i could
Have I made my mark? Should I just sit back and reflect on my life?
I want to know where the next footprints will lead? What's next for
me?
I will officially "retire" this year and leave a job I have loved.
Almost 60 years as an educator.....why do I still feel the need to give to
others?
I have been blessed to have opportunities to do servant work but what
is next? For whom? To
whom?
My life has been a dream, my best dream.
While it was never easy, in every role I played, there was a mission
waiting for me to find it and run
with it. It never seemed like work.
It wasn't ever easy but looking back it now seems it was meant to be
and so smooth almost a
dream....so seamless....so natural

There has to be something out there I can latch on to give my life more
meaning than "retired."
I know down deep there is something out there but it remains elusive
and I am not very
comfortable with elusive. I want to know.
While I don't know what next will be, I am content, though anxious,
that there is something out
there that is waiting for me to show up.
A new job? A new role? A new activity or group to lead?.....I really
don't know.
A book to write? Maybe?

I do feel that whatever it is, I will find “it”maybe “it” will find me.
Somedays, I fear that tomorrow will start without me.

Headaches and Heartaches

Today, my head hurts.
Seems like there are endless collisions going on at the same time.
I don't know how many collisions I can take, but it hurts.
Everyday more bad news in the world.....yet, everyday a few rays of
sunshine break through.
When will the world settle down?.....Will we ever be “normal” again?

My heart hurts too. Especially for those being attacked, those that live
each day afraid.....those
that have been harmed for no fault of their own.....so senseless.
Those that cower in
their homes, on their streets.....their families afraid and live in
harms way.....forced to
flee in order to be safe.....what can I possibly do to help
them.....I don't know
them.....they are not my family.....but are they?

I try to imagine what it must feel like to be forced from one's home,
have families split
up.....bombs and guns going offbuildings and homes
collapsing over
me.....destruction aimed at me and my people.....what must
that feel like I
can only guess. What will happen? The questions and
possibilities are haunting my
thoughts.

In the past, no matter what the turmoil going on around me, I could
find a light at the end of the
tunnel. Today, the tunnel is too long to see the other end let
along find a light that

shines its way through. I see nothing but darkness and danger,
fear and panic.

How do we live like this? How do I?

Some days it is easier just to ignore the world around me. The pleasure
is brief because when I

know others are being harmed there is no way for me to feel
comfort and safety. When

I ignore the world because it is too painful to think about..... I
am reminded of the

voices that are calling out for help.....they need our help.....my
help.

I watch the news feeds and watch the refugees walking to safety
carrying the few things they can

salvage.....I can feel the voices of those running to safety....away
from the soldiers, the

bombs, the tanks.....on the streets of their villages, in their
backyards.....

I have prayed for them and their safety and resolution of the conflict.
I've donated money to help with food, medicine and other supplies
needed by the refugees. Seems so little.....What else can I do?

I yearn to feel good again.....about me, my family, my state, my
nation.....my world. I yearn to feel

safe again.....

I'm tired of my head hurting and my heart aching.

What can I do?

Leading: Always on My Mind

I don't know all there is to know about leading but the narrative of my
life has established certain things I know that are the result of the
"research" that is my life.

- I can not lead that to which I am unable to give voice.
If I can not explain it to others, they will not know
what I am talking about let alone where we are going.

- Simplicity is critical to giving voice. Simple enough to be understood. Complex enough to not oversimplify the goal or the tasks involved....or mislead those that will be expected to do the work.
 - Mental models are the best way to introduce any idea as it give those that are to follow can “see” what is being talked about.
 - Core values are critical to inviting people to engage on be on board
-
-

Life's Greatest Gift

The greatest gift we give ourselves and others is “presence”.....being here or there an nowhere else....listening empty and with empathy.....mindfulness.....being in the moment with self and/or others.....open to the experience before us.....living the 100/0 principle of being 100 % present with no expectations of the others with whom you are engaged.

Be here and nowhere else.

When you engage, do nothing but engage, let go of expectations for others

When you are with the ones you love, let your love be present

When you are playing, play well, enjoy the gift

When you are golfing, swear

Whatever you are doing, be in the moment and nowhere else.

The Children

Schools are places for children.....all of the children.....I love to see the eyes of those who are hopeful, know joy, and live in the moment.....I see the eyes of the other children who are not hopeful, they are

anxious.....have not experienced joy.....live somewhere beyond the moment usually behind it or in another place.

Both touch my soul and stir my heart to do something.....ensuring that the hopeful ones are not disappointed and given the opportunities to live their best lives.....I take pause to understand how do I ensure that the other ones have opportunities to live in a world where they are cared for..... experience joy and live in the moment....not worrying about their life outside the walls of the school.

Is it the schools job be caregivers, counselors, sociologist.....if we want kids to learn we must provide the circumstances so that they come to the starting line at the same place as their peers..... Any deficit in that starting line will ensure that the student will forever carry a gap and be behind.

There is no better thing to do with one's life.....my life....than to work on behalf of children and families. That, for me, is where my passion meets my purpose, where my values meet my vision, where my beliefs meet my behaviors and where my goals meet my roles.

I have always desired to “play in the biggest arena possible.” Education and schools are huge arenas and take in what we normally think of as learning and growing up for adult roles. But, school today has become more social support and emotional support so that students who need food, counseling, other social supports have the ability to stop worrying about what is outside of school and take advantage of all schools have to offer.

The World is Going Crazy

I am saddened by the condition of this world that I am leaving for my children and grandchildren. Mostly, I feel a huge sense of blame for a world that is tied up in conflict.....conflicting points of view that are indivisible because of the origin is partisan and leaves no room to consider alternatives let along compromise. So now, I reflect about

what I can do now....at this point in the twilight of my life, what can I do?

I soon will have no allegiances to any particular organization..... no job to lose. What I have is a free and unrestrained ability to reflect on the person I need to be and what I can do to provide others the opportunities and strategies to consider the same for their lives. The notion that gives me comfort is that I can not change the world.....but I can change my world.....mine, my families, my friends, and others that I care deeply about. I need to be the person I can be so we can stand in the reality of our lives and give others an example of what is possible.

Things are changingout of our and my control.....I grieve the deep sense of loss of what might have been....my future....our future....some of which will never be.....the future we face is not of my choosing and not of the choosing of many of us.....A new and unknown future is being forced on me.....I grieve the loss of what might have been....the loss of the comfort of the present that is now our past....My life will never be the same as it was and will not be what I thought my future would be.

I barely understand today.....and surely not tomorrow.....at the same time I grieve the loss of a present with which I was comfortable....which I understood....

I am not a pollyanna and there were certainly things with which I was not happy in pre-pandemic times but the future was largely predictable and as a result comfortable. Uncertain times ahead.....leave me more than a little afraid.....for my health....for my work.....for my families and their health and safety.....for the things that I may lose as we move forward and the new future unfolds.....

I hope this future does unfold and does so in “humane” ways and is not just “dumped” on us to deal with chaos, uncertainty and conflicting courses of action.....I am feeling a sense of loss....not from the change but from what the change will mean in my life.....what will be required of me to give up and what new behavior will I need to master.....I worry about how soon I will develop a comfort with new routines like working at home, remote teaching, etc.....Will I lose a sense of control in my life and my work?.....how will my present relationships change with my family, my students, those with whom I

work and depend on.....how will my disposition need to change which has so much to do with the value of the program at Doane University.....

For now, it is likely that the best thing to do is live day-to-day doing things that matter in the best ways of being a servant leader....adapting to the changes we know will come.....maybe stop trying to prevent the future from unfolding.....

Who am I? My Best Self

I don't set goals, new year's resolutions and other strategic objectives of how I want to be better or

what I want to do....Instead, I go back to a mental model called "My best

self."I reflect on who and what I am right now and reflect on ways I can

reach my best self....better at being present with others.....better at completing the

mission I have found....whatever..... and then I write.

Writing my reflections helps me ensure that I am grounded in the present and

considering the steps that lead from here to where I want to be. It helps me not to try

and solve all the world's problems and where I not try to make drastic and monumental

changes which tend to reflect some notion of trying to be perfect.....a savior of the

world?

Ain't gonna happen.....why even think about it.

What I try to reflect on is what it will take to move beyond the person I am and move toward the

person I am supposed to be.....Why am I on this earth?.....What am I supposed to be?

What do I have to give up about my present me to make room for the person I ought to

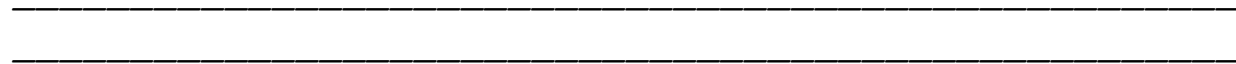
be.....this is hardest thing for me to reflect on but when I do, changes happen.....

when I reflect specifically about the mindset and behavior changes I need to make.....In

what ways do I need to change the way and the things I think about.....and stop wasting

time and energy on just sitting in the present thinking everything about me is good

Enough.



Wisdom Comes Softly

I try to remember

- There is nothing I can do to create wisdom and I desire to be thought of as wise in the matters of the world.....we can not do things to create wisdom.....and, life experiences are not enough.....
- Here is what I have learned about wisdom.....
 - Wisdom comes softly.....when we stop looking for it....and when we start to become the person we were put on the earth to be.....Wisdom will come when i give up who I currently am and let person I am supposed to be emerge.
 - Wisdom is my “place of grace”...a place for me to be me.....forget the rules.....forget the expectations of others.....just be me.....
 - My refuge of safety and quiet.....not a retreat or a shelter from the storms of life..... a place where I know who am and what I am becoming.... and where I have the courage to be “all I can be.”
 - My “place of grace”the place where
 - My passion meets my purpose
 - My values meet my visions

- My beliefs meet my behaviors
 - My goals meet my roles.
- What I know.....
 - People with passion always win, even when they appear in the moment to lose.
 - Leading is a journey..... primarily one of finding my own way to me.

Jules Damme

Boy Says to Girl

The first time we meet,
Is through a DM.
Now, I was never the romantic type, but I never thought
That any app cache could hold my crush on you.
You send me 54 characters of text,
Detailing exactly how you edit the very posts I comment on.
I respond with
[crying face emoji, laughing face emoji, fire emoji, exclamation point]
A language that doesn't offer exactly what I think,
Because I've been told before that
"Boys like when you leave them something to discover"
I left so much unsaid between these static emotions
That you couldn't spot the difference between my interest in your pictures
Or the interest I had in you.
We play this game for months.

The first date we have,
Is at the movies.
We see some film that I only wanted to see
So I could crack jokes at the expense of it later.
We sit in the back rows, separated from the rest of the moviegoers.
We sit separated from each other,
Despite purchasing tickets to a movie theater that
Doesn't offer much room between us because I've heard that
"Boys don't like when you are clingy"
The silence turns deafening,
And I'm not paying attention to the movie anymore.
Your face glows in high definition, surround sound
Volume makes it hard to look away.
When you turn your head to catch me staring,
We laugh it off
And finally start watching for plot.
We don't start holding hands until your dad picks us up.

The first time we kiss,
We are at a playground on a late Saturday night..

We sit atop a slide, with cold plastic and metal screws digging into our legs.
The moon is new, and the night sky is unusually loud.
A coyote howls out across the street,
And you laugh when I jump into your arms.
When we let silence take us over again,
I turn my head to catch *you* staring.
We laugh it off,
And then you kiss me.
I've never been electrocuted before, but I imagine
It feels a lot like this.
And yet, I stop myself from kissing you back
Because I've heard "Boys don't like girls who take charge"
We leave some of this galvanic love for later.
I sneak back into my house,
and tell my sister all about you.

The first time you tell me you love me,
it takes my breath away.
We have been dating for two months now,
and you don't like how I talk about myself.
This tension fills out the pond we sit on,
and I feel like the boat would capsize with hostility at any moment.
Eventually, tension turns louder and louder
Until every single neighbor within ten miles could hear.
I want to calm you down, but I was never taught how to wage a war with anything besides my body.
"Boys only want one thing from you"
I offer myself to you as a peacemaking gift.
We don't even make it back to your house before you make it into your own whipping post.
Because you tell me that this is my punishment for a crime I didn't know I could commit.
You wrap a hand around my throat, and whisper that you are so glad we are in love.

Sometimes, when I turn on the radio
The stations tune themselves until
All I hear is our song
When I hear the whispers of
What you last told me in between
Verse and Chorus and Bridge
I feel like I am 14 again.
"Boys will love you so much
That being with them can be unhealthy"
It wasn't until I loved someone else

With the intensity of you loving me
That I realized they were right.

Luke Henriksen

End

I woke up with a searing pain tearing through me, unable to tell where I was or even who I was. But as soon as I gained enough awareness to try and scream, the pain had already begun to fade, collapsing into nodes in my head and along my neck. By the time I found my voice, the sensation was already down to a dull ache. Then, as I opened my eyes to the surroundings, curiosity rose, and pushed away the remaining pain.

I was lying on my back on something soft, looking up at a light grey sky. The wind was billowing around me, but I didn't feel cold as I began to sit up. In fact, I was warm, which didn't make sense – I only had on loose fitting black silk clothing, which in itself was unfamiliar. I was on what seemed to be a mountaintop with only the clouded sky past the decline, sitting on a thick patch of foliage that spread in all directions over the ground. Grass, vines, shrubs, and flowers were tangled in a thick layer of green that almost covered my ankles. They didn't prick my skin as I expected, nor did they catch on my clothing.

But something else caught my attention; a figure stood in my periphery about 6 feet away, watching me. I scrambled to my feet, a slight chuckle escaping from its direction, and spun to face it.

It was a skeleton, about my height, dressed in a white sleeveless cloak that draped to right above the grass, and whose bones were entwined with rose vines. Red rose buds and blooms were dotted along the arms, in the left eye socket, and poking above the sternum where the cloak collar ended. She – and I don't know how I knew it was a she – began to speak to me, her voice carrying over the wind in a calming, gentle tone. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you." She clasped her hands in front of her and took a step forward.

I took a step back. "Who are you?"

She stopped, and immediately I felt bad, my question sounding too harsh in retrospect. However, her body language seemed relaxed, and she laughed a little. "My dear, you don't need to ask questions that you already know the answer to."

I somehow knew she was right, and I felt like I did know her. She was a familiar presence, not a danger. But my mind was still struggling to grasp at words to describe her, some way to express the identity that I knew innately was hers, but couldn't communicate. "I... uh..." I stalled, trying to look for hidden clues in the landscape around me. Then, a word came to mind. "Alright Death, why am I here?"

She chuckled, shaking her head a little. "Please, you know the answer to that one too." Moving closer again, a little slower, she extended her hand towards me, palm up. "Let us walk a little, my child. We should get you out of this wind."

My thoughts whirled; I still didn't know why I was here at all. And why was she calling me "child" and "dear" – How can a skeleton be so motherly? But as I stood there, I found a part of myself wanting to go with her, to see more of this strange place, and so I slowly placed my hand on top of hers. Instead of the cold bone and sharp thorns I had expected, her hand felt warm to the touch as she wrapped her

fingers around mine in a gentle grasp. She began to lead me down the mountainside, humming as we walked.

As we moved past the edge of the flat peak, I saw that the mountain sloped down into a mist (or were those clouds?) that obscured the base. No other peaks broke through its flat expanse. The foliage grew wild all the way down the mountainside, giving a layer of color until it hit the mist. It was a beautiful view, if a lonely one.

As we continued down the gentle slope, a stray thought crossed my mind. "Death?"

"Yes, love?"

"Why aren't you... scarier?"

She let out another light chuckle as we turned a corner, coming to a small nook where short trees grew in a miniature forest on the slight incline. She led me to a fallen trunk and sat down, motioning for me to do the same. "Do you find me scary?"

I sat, trying not to meet her gaze. "A little, I just thought... you know... that you'd be... a lot more so?"

She cocked her head to the side, looking off towards the sky, and I felt like I could almost see a smile in her bony face. She turned back to me, a hint of a laugh in her voice. "I have only ever been what you have dreamed me to be."

I looked up. "What?"

"All that you see of me, all that you know about me, it came from here." She lifted her other hand, and touched its index finger to my forehead. Pulling it away, she took my other hand in hers. "I've changed a lot over the years, but this 'grim reaper' look has stayed the longest so far."

She laughed a little then, and I couldn't help but grin. A warm feeling bloomed within me, along with memories of something comforting – sounds of people talking familiarly to each other, moments of laughter, a sense of belonging. But before I could try to make sense of it, they faded away, whirling back into the confusion.

I blinked back into focus as she brought my hands up with hers, putting them together between us. A bit of amusement still tinged her voice as she leaned in slightly. "Tell me, what do you know about me?"

I looked down, trying to remember the stories I had been told to no avail. Finally, I looked up to match eye to empty socket, sheepish expression to expectant skull. "I don't know... I've always thought you were a skeleton, but I also always thought you'd be... darker somehow."

She cocked her head again, and even without her saying anything I knew her smile widened. "I... I mean like you had a black cloak, had a scythe, and that you were really tall and ancient and kinda spooky, just kind of a force of nature that everyone was afraid of."

"Ah yes, the classic image."

Her smile I felt hadn't decreased at all, so I kept going. "But some people also thought of you as really wise, accepting, and a sort of merciful being."

"Oh?"

"A bit of a motherly figure."

She nodded, then let go of one hand and stood, gently pulling me along. "Let's walk a little more dear, I'm feeling adventurous."

I followed as we walked through the nook, out the other side, and over the thick carpet of plants once more, traveling down the decline while circling around the mountainside. As we walked, she looked back at me. "I like to think I'm more motherly than spooky."

She squeezed my hand briefly, then let go, stopping for a moment and crouching down to comb through the plants below us. I crouched nearby as she brushed her hand over the flowers. "From how you've been talking to me, it seems like you are."

"Thank you love, that makes me so very happy."

She looked at me for a moment, giving me the sense that she was smiling again, then turned back to the foliage. I looked at it too, seeing the untrampled grass and flowers. I admired how full it all was, wondering if I had ever seen something like this before. Visions of trampled grass and flowers torn from the soil flashed in my mind. I saw a desolate field, charred dirt spreading in all directions – no man's land.

I shook myself out of it, the memory fading a bit slower than the last ones. I looked at Death again. "Why do you prefer being motherly?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you deal with so much evil in the world, I just thought..."

She looked up at me, her head cocked to the side. I blushed, turning away slightly, but tried to explain myself. "I just thought you would be grittier... or something, I don't know."

She looked down and made a sound between a laugh and a sigh. "It's not really a preference I guess, I just feel..."

Something in the grass caught her attention; she reached towards it, picking a plant with white flowers out of the ground. "Aha! Found you!"

"What is it?"

"This is a flower that went extinct not too long ago for you. *Valerianella Affinis* was what you called it."

The plant had a few small blooms together in a bunch, but it didn't look very remarkable at all. She put a hand on my cheek to turn my head, and placed the flower behind my ear. "There we go, not too spooky right?"

I nodded, and she stood up, extending her hand again. "I know all the plants on this mountain like the back of my hand." I held out my own, and she helped me to my feet. "They're all important to me. The life that comes here, that is." We began to walk again, and she linked her arm in mine. "That's why I said I was happy to see you."

I wasn't sure how to take that, but I let her lead me until we reached a cave opening. There, she let my arm go and walked up to the cave, motioning for me to join her. I was thinking about how to ask her what she meant as I followed her inside, the light dimming but never dropping too low to see her in front of me. After a few seconds of following behind, I started to notice a light purple glow reflecting off the walls in front of me – gradually increasing in intensity at first, but when we turned a corner into a cavern I couldn't help but gasp at the sudden brightness. The light came from patches of glowing plants, but was amplified off the crystal growths of the chamber making the cave almost as bright as outside.

Eventually my eyes adjusted, and I saw her seated on a small outcropping by an underground lake. She motioned me over and I sat next to her, captivated by the view of the cave. After a moment, she tapped my knee. "Are you doing alright my dear?"

"Yes, I think so, just..."

I struggled for a second to remember what had confused me earlier. "I just don't understand a few things."

Some moments passed as I tried to think of the right words. At last, I turned to look into her patient, expressionless face. "What do you mean that's why you were happy to see me? And why do you keep calling me 'child'? And why am I here in the first place?"

She let out a long sigh, then cautiously reached for my hand again. I pulled away, and she paused, then put her hands into her lap, her face focused on the ground. "Well you see, my child, when you called me Death, I let you use that name for convenience's sake. That name isn't entirely accurate."

I stared at her, and she let out another sigh, her shoulders noticeably lowering. "I am End. That is the name that is the most accurate to me, although I have been called Death since your languages arose."

She turned to face me. "I call you my child because that's what you are to me. I've seen you come back and leave so often, but it's still a joy every time you return."

"Like a mother with her child."

"Yes, exactly."

I looked into her face, and I realized the flower in her eye socket was shedding petals, almost like tears. The confusion was still there in me, weighing down like a stone in my gut, and I looked away. "But why am I here? I don't remember being here before today, and if you're like a mother then why do you take all the souls that..."

"I do not take souls!"

I looked back up at her, startled by the outburst, and saw the petals all over her cloak. All of her flowers were shedding now, as if in sympathy, their petals littering the ground. A moment passed as I stared, tense, into her adamant face. But then she took what sounded like a shaky breath, and as she released it, relaxed a little. "It is not I who takes you. It is I who welcomes you."

She looked at me with a softer gaze now, her flowers now small and wilted. "I'm sorry dear one, I'm sorry. I shouldn't yell at you."

She looked away, her now petalless flowers turning dark and falling from the vines. The fear and guilt in me began to fade, replaced with the feeling of sorrow. I thought back to when I first saw her, about how scared I had been, how I didn't remember anything but those brief flashes, and about the pain that came before I woke up. But while I was sitting there, trying to remember, an image of a rooftop flashed before my mind.

I focused on it, curious, and found a memory I didn't know I had – I was looking out over a city at the top of a building. I remembered the guilt of failure, the loss of loved ones, and the pain of addiction. All of it was swirling through my mind as my vision lurched during the final step off the roof, adrenaline surging as I plummeted. Then there was the pain, waking up, and this place. As I sat there and remembered, I noticed more memories creeping in. Memories of desolated battlefields new and old, of slow illnesses, of fast crashes. Memories of warm places, of laughter from myself and others,

of being in someone's embrace. I realized I was looking at my own memories, told through countless eyes through countless eons. My own lives and deaths, too numerous to count; and all of them leading to her, to End.

I pulled out of the memories a few seconds after I had followed the first, and saw End with her elbows on her knees with her hands clasped in front, leaning forward. I reached towards her cautiously, and gently put my hand on hers. She looked up at me, the bloom in her socket gone. "I think I understand now." She didn't move. "I remember why I'm here." Her hands shifted under mine, cupping around them.

"Really?"

"Really." I moved my arms around her shoulders, gently pulling her into an embrace. She paused for a second, but then wrapped her arms around me and leaned in. After a few moments I pulled away, but reached to clasp her hand in mine. Looking into her face, I noticed in the light that there was a new bud forming in her left socket. I nodded to her and stood, gently helping her up, and without a word began to lead the way out of the cavern.

We exited the tunnel into the mouth of the cave, and as my eyes adjusted I looked back at her. I saw new white buds all along her vines – not blooming yet, but growing. I slowed to walk closer to her, still holding her hand. "I know what I have to do. I'll be back, I promise."

She nodded, squeezing my hand a little. "I know."

We began to walk down the slope once more, End following behind with her hand still in mine, until we reached the edge of the mist. It was time to part ways, but I knew I'd return. We both did. I didn't want to forget any of this, but that was something that had to be for me to play my part. To live through the wars, sicknesses, deaths, but also to enjoy all the warmth, love, and compassion that could be found.

And someday, I knew I'd find out why. That was the goal – to live and explore.

I looked back at End, and saw that lilies had begun to sprout from the buds, and the one in her eye was beginning to unfold into its shape. She looked at me for a moment, squeezed my hand, then slowly loosened her grip. "Be good, okay?"

I smiled. "I'll always try."

I let go of her hand and began to walk towards the mist. Pausing, I looked back again. "I love you, End."

She smiled warmly, the lilies now fully grown.

"And I love you, Life."

I smiled back, then walked into the mist – back down the mountain.

I Live for the Wild Nights

I live for the wild nights,

The terrible nights,
Where man's temporary structures
Are made to remember
Just how temporary they are.

I live for the raging nights,
The ferocious nights,
Where all of man's hubris
Is made painfully obvious
To all else in nature.

I live for the destructive nights,
The vengeful nights,
Where all is flattened in its path
Taking out the old and worn
And making room for new growth.

And after the tormenting nights,
The wild nights,
The destruction it wreaked
Is ripe for rebuilding
And regrowing of nature and man.

Likeness in Tin

Somewhere in the void
Between infulptulous saccration,
Lies the sucking stoid
Peeling galactic cores

And in the teeny lores
Becomes the chewing stoid
Eating through the stores
Of the little hovel

The hosts do then grovel
To their scarpan lord

Yining certain throvel
And grow likeness in tin

But when it grows thin
The rime clocks wear down
Yining in the last sin
And bring the sucking stoid

River

The river runs deep,
That's how it's always been.
It remains unexplored,
Despite trying back then.
But what doctors, friends, and parents
Could never really see,
Is that the river runs deep
But underneath it's me.

I toiled every day,
Afraid of getting caught;
Accused of greatest sin:
Being who I'm not.
But is the one I am
The one I want to be?
Or are they in the river,
Down where I can't see?

The "mentors" that I've had
Tried to lead to land.
Truer teachers in my life
Never tried to understand.
Most already knew
The troubles I would dread,
But in the place of shelter
They taught me how to tread.

I can't go back to shore,
My only way is down.
I see the worried faces
Of those who think I'll drown.
The way ahead is rapids;
They say I'll lose a limb.
But the river still runs deep,
And I know how to swim.

Jessica Himmelberg

Small Town Movie

No one ever talks about moving to college from a small town and feeling like the main character. They only show it in movies, but they never get the angle right.

They start the movie with your dad getting one of the farm trucks out of the shed because your minifridge won't fit in a regular car. Cut scene to you arriving at college and the parents helping you move in. You unpack and it only takes thirty minutes while your roommate takes damn near four hours to finish. Parents take you out to dinner, take you back to your dorm room, and take their last hug, say their last goodbye, and ask if you know when you'll be back.

That's when the movie really begins, in college. But moving there really starts when you are born, when the phrase "it takes a village" begins to work its magic. Everyone in town knows that your parents just welcomed a new life into this world, and the world around it. The community showers you with presents and your parents with congratulations.

Though you don't remember that part. Your earliest memories go back to a birthday, you aren't sure which one but it was probably your 2nd birthday, when your great grandparents gave you a small plastic stroller for your dolls. A late summer day, so you had a bucket hat and a pink striped dress on with little embroidered flowers on the front. Is it really a memory? Or was it just something you saw in your photo book and think is a memory? Either way, whenever you smell that smoke on a hot August day you swear you can turn around and see them on the front porch no matter where you are.

Then you are meeting the neighbor kids. The girl that will be your best friend to this day, and the boy who would be your date to many school dances. The kids you will ride your hand-me-down bike from your brother around town with and feel like you own those pothole ridden roads.

You begin third grade. That's when the community starts to see your potential. Now, you might think it's your artwork. But the watercolor you did for your teacher that year will just hang up in her house. Until you get some real work out your freshman year of highschool that will win state 4-H and then move onto an exhibit for a while before you get it back and it collects dust in your childhood bedroom. That's not it though. That's just your creativity showing. The real work teachers have been noticing is your school work. Those standardized test scores will get you somewhere, but you are too young to understand so they just tell you "good job."

Middle school was tough; it is for everybody. The girls are mean, your body is changing, and there is nothing you can do about it except put in the work. You start to put all your effort, time, and energy into your work. Your precious childhood freetime that could be spent watching cartoons becomes homework time. The reading skills you were so good at in elementary now becomes an escape and you go through the entire section of fiction your library has at your level. By seventh grade you will be at a college reading level. You take the ACT the same year, from some program that was designed to give gifted kids more opportunities.

By the time you start freshman year of highschool you also start your first job. The job that will eventually take all the "Friday night lights" away once they move you from the Sunday buffet shifts. Still you claim you are grateful for this job, and you truly are, but wish that there were more fun and

reckless nights. The classes start to get harder, but manageable. The only thing is trying not to miss deadlines and being on top of your work.

Sophomore year is no different, you can't remember much except for homecoming when you were part of homecoming court. Then working while getting texts from your friends asking when you'd be off work, but work doesn't end until midnight and attending isn't possible when you smell like a french fry from all the greasy food you've served. There are thoughts of an English major, you want to write stuff. You go to this amazing day camp at this private university and are hooked. You just know this place is home. Then your best friend graduates, and she goes to the state university leaving you alone in your small town.

Junior year you start working a weekly night shift on a school night. You also ask out this insanely nerdy and smart and wonderful guy from the rival school. He reads, he watches Star Wars, he is into everything you are. So you take this college course that is offered at his highschool with him. You start into the medical field and you love it because you are good at it. Abandoning your English hopes, you put every single effort into this and do not write anything. That private university that feels like home is no more. Going there means that you wouldn't focus on your career and getting everything that you think you want. So the state university it is, even though when you tour you feel like you are going to vomit the entire time.

The arrival of senior year is lonely. The guy you loved, for what you knew love to be, dumped you because he knows that your paths are meant to diverge. Even though he knows that the state university isn't the best school for you, and he swears he isn't going to go there. It's whatever. Again you are in homecoming court, but the girl who would later accuse you of having an eating disorder in front of everyone wins instead. Your running partner for the last five years starts a rumor that you are sleeping with her ex because you are nice to him. He needs a good friend right now, so you continue to be a good friend to him and even go to prom together. You go to your shotgun competition, win third conference team, come back, win prom queen, go to prom, then go to his prom and he dances with this one girl and you feel your gut drop. You know. She has something that you don't, his intimacy. The next morning when he is driving you back home he asks you out and you are vague about giving an answer. After that you get accused of having an eating disorder by the girl who was one of your closest friends. Then graduation. You were on top of your class for years, and all of a sudden, you are second. Salutatorian. Your speech is better than the valedictorian's, the girl who won homecoming queen. You feel like no matter how hard you work, you always come in second. You decide two weeks before graduation about college. Private university it is, and screw medical field or biology, you are going to write.

Freedom of summer has begun. You ditch that guy that is playing games and dive head first into three summer jobs. Then you end the summer by leaving your number for a waiter in South Dakota because you swear, he is the hottest person you have ever met. Somehow you don't care that your mom is judging you for leaving your number on a receipt, but your grandma high fives you so that's fun.

Finally the curtains open, and the movie starts.

Now you are sitting here wondering. That guy you dated ended up going to the state university. That girl who you came in second place to is also at that state university. You don't really talk to either of them anymore. The guy who played games with you ended up going to the same college as you, then

dropping out. That movie was so typical of the small town girl life that you could have sworn it was you the entire time.

Joshua Johnson

Alone

Alone no one can judge you, nor can they pronounce, whether they think you mad or not, for there's no one else. Alone no one can laugh at you, nor can they incite,

for you're never there for them, you're always out of sight. Alone no one can thrill you, nor can they surprise,

the world becomes predictable, mechanical in your eyes. Alone no one is friends with you, nor can you pretend, because such things seem trivial, except for when you're dead. Alone no one can soothe you, nor can this torment end, the dull ache ever present, is now your only friend.

Alone no one can love you, nor can you love yourself, sometimes you find your essence, inside of life itself.

Cloudy Days

Cloudy days all full of rain, how splendid are they in the grey. In the grey we find the mist, rolling with the thunder's kiss. The thunder's kiss is quite sublime, lightning flashing just in time. Just in time the light shall fade, the orb of night now in full shade. In full shade the darkness reigns, the night now calling through the rain. Through the rain we've heard the call, joyous are we in its thrall. In its thrall we find ourselves, nocturnal creatures of the shelves.

Innocence

Storms are raging, swirling inside, as the sirens blare outside. Blaring sirens do foretell, the coming of Mother Nature's hell. Her private hell, our hurricane, is something which reveals her pain. Anguished in her own mind's eye, we all pay for others' crimes. Crimes that we did not commit, indeed we are quite innocent. Yet innocence is now a crime, thanks to mankind's greed & lies.

Quincey Johnson

The Golden Ears

A preface on this work:

This I Believe was a five-minute program that ran from 1951 to 1955 on CBS Radio Network. The show encouraged both famous and everyday people to write short essays about their own personal motivation in life and then were read on the air. Many celebrities took part in the opportunity and there are published works containing these essays that many read and study today. At the end of one of the publications, there is a prompt for an ordinary human to write and submit a *This I Believe* Essay to a publisher.

Thank you for listening. I believe in listening. Listening is important. Successful leaders listen to what people believe, what they want most - public praise, financial rewards, or personal fulfillment. When the leaders of America's great automobile manufacturing concerns stopped listening to their employees, to their customers, to their competitors - their market share declined drastically. They became victims of their own perceived supremacy.

Successful followers, successful employees listen too - to their leaders, their goals, and their plans for accomplishing them. They listen for what is expected of them, where they fit in. The Israelites listened when Moses spoke and began to prepare for the long, long journey to The Promised Land.

And successful speakers listen for what interests people, what entertains them, what moves them. No matter how well they prepare, how splendidly they use language, if they do not listen they lose their audience. Like the preacher in the cattle-rich cowtown of Cheyenne, Wyoming who lost his congregation when he took as his text "Feed My Sheep". Like the student who was daydreaming in class, not attentively listening to his professor and missed the whole assignment description.

But important as listening is to your success as a leader, a follower, a speaker - in your jobs, in your communities, in your private lives - such personal rewards for listening are not the reasons I flouted the rules.

I began by thanking you for listening because I want you to consider the rewards of listening from the viewpoint of those to whom you listen to, to see your own listening as a golden gift to others.

A golden gift, first of all, because you must spend upon it one of your most valuable assets - your time.

You have so little time. You depend daily on planners, drive in high occupancy vehicle lanes, take time management courses - to save time. Fathers and mothers work. They get up early; they get up late. Children have homework, band practice, sporting events. Who has time to listen to one another? It's easier to leave messages on the refrigerator or the phone. To stop and really listen takes time - precious time. Have Golden Ears. This I believe.

Abrianna Miller

Blue Moon

At 15 years old I had my first confrontation with alcohol, a six-year-old warm bottle of Blue Moon.

When my ex-boyfriend handed it to me, enough excitement bubbled out of me for myself and the long-lost cause of a beer. That first sip was the only drop of alcohol that I have genuinely despised. My ex and his brother thought I was weak. Being the prideful mess that I am, I kept drinking it until the bottle was a little more than halfway empty.

That Blue Moon was an omen for how the next two years with my ex would go. I would be ignored, set aside for something better, forced into making him happy at my expense. That's not to say there were no glorious moments; our golden age filled me past capacity with joy.

We would go on adventures tramping through the woods, watch the stars on the hood of his truck, dance in the middle of the road at sunset.

But it wasn't enough. I was only one bottle, and a not-so-finely-aged one at that. And he was an alcoholic with an eye for whatever was readily at hand. Buried time and time again, I couldn't dig up to the surface fast enough to capture his attention before he put the cap back on.

I had had enough. It was disgusting. I couldn't pretend it wasn't anymore.

To prove a point, my ex laughed at me and took a sip too. He didn't even drink it, just spit it out the second his taste buds' neurotransmitters connected with his brain. The bottle shattered against an old willow tree while my ex chastised me for drinking so much of that shitty beer.

Nothing I could do was right, but I felt like I deserved his criticism in the moment.

Those 25 minutes pretty much sums up our two-year relationship.

Even when our relationship fell apart, I kept a firm grasp on the bottle.

Alcohol used to be unconditionally enjoyable, anytime, anyplace. Now that enough time has passed to match the age of that Blue Moon, I can understand why that glass held on for so long. Once the cap comes off, there's no turning back. Both of our hands were forced, and the ending is just the same, chipped apart into tiny pieces that look beautiful at the right angle but will still cut you open.

The difference between me and the Blue Moon is that I was chosen out of the crowd, and the bottle was a last resort at the bottom of an abandoned cooler.

More often than not, I feel like I'm in retrograde; I can't escape the pull of the past. It keeps me planted in the worst moments of my life at the core. Sure, I have accomplished things and continued living, but the essence of my person cannot sever my connection to every less-than-great thing that has ever happened to me.

The day my cap was brutally ripped off was, incidentally, one of my happiest days. Classes were going great, my mental health was as stable as ever, my coffee was the perfect balance of bitter and sweet.

Then my phone rang.

Todo sobre mi madre by Pedro Almodóvar was dancing across the screen in class, and the climax was steadily approaching. My phone rang. It was one of the housing directors which was strange, so I left the room to talk to her.

Pleasantries were exchanged, but I felt her apprehension in my bones.

Sheriff. Subpoena. Sorry. Support. Sacrifices.

That poor officer felt horribly about having to meet me. He didn't even get out of his vehicle and apologized over and over before he gave me the paperwork. Tears started to creep up into the trenches of his eyes as he prepared to drive away. Our eyes met and for a moment I thought he would take it back, take all of it back- the papers, the pain, the drive, everything. But all he said was, "I can't imagine this moment if you were my daughter."

And that was it. In 30 seconds, one of the most debilitating moments of my life ended for everybody else. I shattered at the hands of the willow tree, and no one wanted to risk getting cut while picking up the pieces.

My boyfriend sprinted across campus and somehow arrived in time to hold me. I collapsed into him with nothing to support myself. Numbness filled every part of my body; my muscles were functionally useless, as was I.

I spent the rest of the day in rigor mortis in the cooler, nothing surrounding me except for the insulated walls that threatened to collapse. A broken record spun nonstop from somewhere outside my sealed capsule. I couldn't escape even if I had the energy to try.

"You deserve this. You made it up. You fucking liar. You deserve this. You made it up. You fucking liar."

With bubbles rising to the surface, tears slid down my face in time with the record. A Blue Moon invigorates a person at the right occasion, but unfortunately for me, that occasion is not searching through the brush, searing your skin open with each sweep.

The more memories that rose to the surface, the less I knew about myself. I was supposed to be this stout, dependable person that stood up to the test of time. And one day I just wasn't. My spark faded, my taste disappeared, my identity mellowed.

I was drained, flat, wasted.

It's still out there somewhere, you know. That bottle withstood years of abuse and stayed strong, and it can do it again. It's name is Blue Moon because it's rare and it's classic. None of that has changed.

Now there are just more shards, each one more lethal and determined to prove something than the last.

Mason Morrill

The Revolution Will Not Be a Subscription Service

Netflix. Spotify with Hulu. Amazon Prime, with Prime TV access. A Costco Executive Membership. YouTube TV. Xbox Live. Ring Doorbell. ADT Security. These are most of the services I or an immediate family member are paying a subscription fee for, most set to automatically renew for our own convenience. We don't have to think about or make any efforts to search out the content, it's just a few clicks, taps, swipes, or scrolls away. Often times these services are not enough on their own; it's practically a guarantee that my phone is getting pulled out within the first fifteen minutes of consuming, switching to a second screen to browse and troll through now that the evening's background noise has been selected. Reddit. Twitter. YouTube. Back to Reddit. Check the Washington Post headlines I dismissed earlier. Put in a headphone and a podcast on while you scroll. Don't worry about retaining the information from the chorus of sources, you'll rewatch/listen/read again tomorrow, filling those moments of silence with sources of consumption, a fresh plate of white noise to drown out, what? What am I smothering? What are *we* smothering? Are we even the ones doing the smothering?

No, back to the screens. Back to the noise. There's meaning in the screens, in the media, in the noise. Through the consumption, we find meaning. We find contentment. We are satiated, maybe even satisfied if we're lucky.

Or unlucky. Cursed, even, with modern conveniences. Driven to suburban domiciles, our fortresses of solitude, hidden away from our neighbors as we submerge ourselves into infinity pools of content consumption. This is not an active process, it's purposefully effortless. Just wade into the water and lean back, letting the wind and waves carry you from one destination to the next. All you need to engage is your wrist and a few fingers and you'll be swept out from one recommendation to the next. The moments between these sessions are merely necessary tasks that will continue to fund the subscriptions that facilitate our escapes into the Lethe.

This cycle of comfortable consumption, and the modern systems and conveniences that make it possible, is poison. It serves to atomize and isolate, driving us into the safety of our homes where we can consume with unending convenience. Click, tap, swipe, indulge. And because this is the picture of modern existence, we take on our consumer habits as keystones of our personhood, our existence, our identities. On the dating apps I browse, users will all too often fall back onto the brands and products they consume to gesture at who they are. Endless Jims/Machine Gun Kellies/Visions/etc. in search of their Pams/Megan Foxes/Wandas/etc., with empty listings of Marvel, Harry Potter, Disney, Bob's Burgers, New Girl, and so on and so forth ad infinitum. But I can't blame those who define themselves through consumption for the habit. The Pandemic™TM©[®] drove everyone into their homes, forcing our entire existences into a single space with no clear delineation between work, education, or relaxation. How do you turn off or check out when the one space that was supposed to be an escape now must facilitate every aspect of our lives? It certainly doesn't help that these devices and systems are built to be self-perpetuating; the walls of our fortresses are built thicker and taller with every means of independent and isolated consumption. Virtual doctors, mail-order medication subscriptions,

commercials that tell us to avoid having uncomfortable conversations with our doctors and just buy this thing that will solve our discomforts have all been on the rise in the last two years, becoming more ubiquitous and universal with each passing day. You don't need to suffer alone in silence, join the millions of people who have made the leap and tried our solution. With our solution, you can go back to consuming in peace. Together. But alone. Put on your white noise programs, put in a single headphone to listen to the daily news, and fill out your home shopping order that will be delivered tomorrow by an under-paid, over-worked employee of the conglomerate who probably owns some or all of the vessels of consumption you are enjoying at the moment. Forget the fact that you are almost certainly that under-paid and over-worked employee of a conglomerate, they're here to help you.

This is life under late-stage capitalism. Individualized, atomized, divided. There is no "we," only you. Your movements, your hobbies, your quick question searches, your private conversations, all an avenue for monetization; data profiles that are sold to the highest bidders to manufacture inorganic needs in you. Externalities are accelerating this process, the Pandemic™©® chief among them. But the resurgence of corporate monopolization and the men at the top of that ladder are driving this train; the robber barons of the 21st Century are not captains of industrial manufacturing, but of the digital and virtual space. They directly or indirectly manufacture the empty holes in our lives through their employment practices or the politicians they fund and support, while producing the means of consumption they sell as the caulk to fill that space. Interpersonal relationships and self-identity are both now filtered through our consumer habits, rather than being self-determined or discovered through our shared humanity.

So, what do we do? Log off? Go outside? Touch grass? Read a book? Well, yes and no. An important step away from the isolation we have been driven into is personal autonomy and ownership. Everything we do, the jobs we work, the products we consume, are all made and manufactured for macro consumption to maximize profits. While we will eventually need to grapple with the largest forces perpetuating our current state, we need to start small and locally. Personal ownership and investment over our work inherently marries us to the quality of that work; humanizing and democratizing workplaces leads to greater buy-in from employees, making them happier and more productive. Community investment, both financially and creatively, tears down the walls of our individual fortresses and unites us towards collective benefits. The rabid individualism that is seems to be uniquely American is a major force that will gum up collective works, but it is a manufactured attitude that can be broken. The Pandemic™©®, while a major dividing force, has also been a unifying force. We just need to carry that momentum and those ideals into other aspects of our lives and collective culture. Humans are inherently social creatures, and the idea that all societal problems must be met with individual action is a fallacious lie perpetuated by those who benefit and profit from that individualization and isolation. Do not buy the narrative that you can only change what you can do. Those in power seek to divide the classes below them, often pitting them against one another or manufacturing a new, ultimate threat to pull focus away from the issues that truly matter and directly affect your day-to-day life. That meaning we are all struggling to find in the face of the Pandemic™©®, war in Europe, climate change, and countless other macro and micro existential challenges can be

found beyond the walls of our fortresses. And if it's not immediately discovered, you can find new leads towards that meaning while also serving efforts that better your community at large.

Untitled Monologue

A library.

REGINA: There was an after-school program here. Every day I'd cross the street and wander around the stacks, getting lost in these monoliths. Well, what seemed like monoliths. I remember, maybe around first grade? I thought I was so special for being able to jump up and touch the fifth shelf. (*Laughing, rediscovering a memory.*) My younger brother and I used to have this competition where we'd see who could touch the highest shelf, or, you know, use a book to mark our height. And we did this for *years*. We got so into it we'd rope other kids into judging for us, others eventually started cheering us on. The nerdiest vertical leap competition you can imagine, surrounded by this pack of kids yelling and screaming, rallying us to reach a taller Faulkner or Poe. The last time, I must've been in fifth or sixth grade? And Andrew, he wasn't going to lose that day. He said, "fuck the books, I'm hitting the top shelf." (*Laughing, seeing the competition.*) And just as he made the jump, Ms. Lilly comes 'round the corner and is like, "What the hell is going on...", and Andrew pulls down the entire top shelf. It was chaos, you know? Some of the kids are laughing, others are crying...books spilled out *everywhere*. I'm pretty sure one boy, what was his...Leon? Yeah, Leon, he took a dictionary to the head and had "Webster" pressed in reverse on his forehead for a few days.

Regina laughs, this is the first time she's remembered this in years.

I'm sure Andrew would kick my ass now...

A beat. Regina takes in the stacks surrounding her.

After that, Andrew and I weren't allowed to be out in the library together. If he was looking for a book, I had to be at a table with the other kids. Or Ms. Lilly. And if I was really mad at him for, whatever, I would wander out in the shelves, find a book that looked interesting, and just plop down right there and start reading. The stacks and books would all just, blur together. A few times, Ms. Lilly and my mom or dad, whoever was picking me up that week, would put together a search party of other kids to come find me...I wish I had found something to bring back to Andrew, something he would've read. But what can you do, you know?

Regina takes a beat. She peruses a shelf, pulls out a book, and opens it.

In all the times that I got lost in these shelves, in these books, the one thing I never found was myself. Or people like me. Expressions I could fully understand or identify. In the Dewey Decimal

System the 200s are for all religions, with every tenth number denoting a change in subcategory. So 200 is just "Religion." 210, Religious philosophy and theory. 220, the Bible. And so on. Do you know where all non-Christian religions are? 290. 294 encompasses all religions of Indic origin. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism. Islam? That's 297. And if you don't fit in any of that, you get squeezed into 299: "Religions not provided for elsewhere." And where can I find myself in the 200s? 299.6, "religions originating among Black Africans and people of Black African descent." Even if I knew what modern country my ancestors were abducted from, my family, my history is shoved at the tail end of a category that glorifies the one, true faith with shelf upon shelf. Floor to ceiling shelves are dedicated to a text as historically consistent as putty, that has been cited as a justification for my people's subjugation. A faith that preaches universal, unconditional love. All while you can measure our history in inches.

A beat.

Was Melvil conscious of what he was doing? Maliciously denying anyone not like him space on his shelves? I...I don't know. It's not like he wasn't transgressive for the time. He championed women studying library sciences, even getting fired from his position at Columbia because he accepted applications from women when the university barred us from even applying to study there. But, he also suggested the women applying give a physical description of themselves in the application, encouraged them to include a photograph and asked about their weight, hair and eye color, because he wanted to fuck them. And everyone knew that's why he asked those questions. Melvil, he...I don't know if he would've seen me as lesser and subservient because of my skin, or because he would've seen me as a fresh slab of meat for him to crave. But his legacy was a home for me and countless other girls and boys to explore and discover, though your ease of self-discovery is just conditional.

A beat.

You know what I really wish I could do? If I could meet Melvil today, I'd like to shake his hand as a fellow librarian, spit in his eye as a woman of color, and thank him for his work. But I think I'll take it from here, Mr. Dewey.

Lights out.

Untitled Scene #2

Note: Actions paired with "/" happen simultaneously. Actions without spaces – "sweepsweepsweep" – happen in quick succession, the first word being the first action.

Sweep. Sweep. Sweep. Tap. Lights up. #3, downstage center, sweeps to upstage left. He is hunched, broken. He is methodical, purposeful, and precise with his pace. This underscores everything.

Sweep. Sweep. Sweep. Tap. #2, sitting centerstage and facing left in profile, is at his table. He begins typing in furious bursts, his thoughts revving and relaxing; an engine ready to launch. His typing begins on the first sweep and ends on the third. Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. Tap.

Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. Tap. #1, sitting upstage left, reads a newspaper, obstructing his face. He sits upright, legs crossed. This is his domain. He turns the page almost immediately following #3's broom tap. Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. Tapturnpage.

Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. Tapturnpage. Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. Typeturnpage.

Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep/Stop. TapturnpageSTAND. #2 has stood up. He pulls out the paper, puts it under a small stack, taps them together, and staples them. He treasures his creation. Sweep/Pull. Sweep/Taptaptap. Sweep/Staple. Tapturnpage.

#2 turns up to #1 as #3 turns downstage with a dustpan. #2 crosses upstage and hands the papers to #1.

#2: Now it's ready.

#1 folds his newspaper. He takes the papers from #2 and flips through them as #3 kneels and sweeps his dirt into the dustpan. Fold/Kneel. Flipsweepsweepsweep. Flipsweepsweepsweep. Flipsweepsweepsweep.

#1 exhales, stands, crosses upstage to a trashcan, turns full-front, tears papers, and drops them into the overflowing trashcan. As #1 crosses, #2 turns downstage right. When #1 turns full-front, #3 turns upstage left of mat and continues sweeping upstage. Cross/Turn. Open/Turn. Sweep/Tear. Sweep/Tear. Sweep/Drop.

Sweep/As he drops the papers:

#1: No, it's not.

#1 returns to chair, sits, and rolls to cube where he kicks up his feet and returns to his newspaper. #2 crosses to his table and leans on it. He stares at the typewriter. Sweep. Sweep. Sweep. Tapturnpage. He swipes pencil cup off his table. #3 stops sweeping. He turns and stares at the mess of pencils. #1 turns to watch #3.

#3: You dropped those.

#3 drops broom and dustpan, crossing to pick up the pencils. He kneels and begins dropping them into their cup.

#3: Let me help.

Drop. Drop. Drop. Turn page. #2 stares at #3, bewildered. He has never heard him speak. As #3 picks up the pencils, #2 takes his pen and crosses to the mat, where he sits down, clicking away on his pen. Drop. Clickclickclickclick. Drop. Clicksturnpage.

#2: *chuckles* You like cleaning?

Drop. Drop. Drop. Turn page. No response. #3 turns to collect the last pencils. #2 turns, looking at #3.

#2: Talkative, aren't ya?

#3 stands, places the pencils on the table and pushes in the chair. He eyes the typewriter. Turn page. No response.

#2 takes dustpan and broom. He dumps the contents on the floor and drops the dustpan.

#2: Look at me when I am talking.

#1 lowers paper, watching. #3 inhales and holds.

#2: Where're you from?

No response. #3 exhales and goes to get broom, head down. #2 turns and trips him.

#2: I said, look at me!

#2 raises the broom to hit #3, who is cowering on the floor. Just as he is about to swing, #1 stands.

#3: No!

#1: Joshua!

#2 freezes, broom raised.

#1: Sweep.

#2 lowers broom but doesn't start sweeping.

#1: And you: write.

#1 sits and turns back with his feet up, reading. #3 turns stands and cautiously approaches the typewriter. Slowly, he begins typing, building speed as he goes, as if he is relearning to crawl, walk, then run: Type. Typetypetype. Typetypetypetypetype; continuing to build until there is no stopping

#2 looks at the broom in his hands, to #3 typing, and back to the broom. Head down, he begins to sweep, slowly and methodically.

Sweep/Type. Sweep. Sweep. Tap.

Blackout.

Boston Reid

Art, In Itself

CHARACTERS

Christopher - Artist in Isolation

Father - Part of scene Christopher is writing

Son - 17 years of age - Part of scene Christopher is writing

Ensemble

Scene One

A pitch black stage.

Christopher: (At his desk. He takes out a piece of paper. Dramatically begins to write his genius work)
LIGHTS UP! On a writer. A lonely writer. On the stage sits a desk that should house a typewriter, but yet he has no idea where to get one. We see a simple setting. A bare stage with a desk. The room has no life. The desk however is a creative mess. Papers, pencils, pictures. It is decorated head to toe WITH life. We see the writer slowly start to realize that what he is writing is happening on stage.

(Christopher looks up and stares at the audience. Taking the time to gather his thoughts. He gets up from his chair and begins to tidy up. This all takes a painfully long time to do. He begins to walk to the edge of the stage)

Christopher: All of that had a stage direction attached to it. The tidying of the papers, me getting up. The excruciating long pause that you had to endure. You know what. Let me read it to you.

(He flies back to the desk to retrieve the few lines he wrote. He walks back.)

Christopher: Christopher looks up and stares at the audience. Taking the time to gather his thoughts. He gets up from his chair and begins to tidy up. This all takes a painfully long time to do. He begins to walk to the edge of the stage. (He folds the paper) And here I am. At the front of the stage. This, I feel, is going to be the first of many monologues. Monologues that tell you too much about me and my process. Alas, you have no idea who I am. Insert here - another monologue.

(Christopher returns to his desk)

Christopher: My name is Christopher. I don't like going by Chris as I feel it is too simple. As you can probably already tell, I have a playful arrogance that is hidden through sarcasm that was brought on by watching too many Mel Brooks films with my dad as a kid. It is also because I am severely introverted and extremely awkward when in person. People might think that I am extroverted, but I am simply trying to find ways to exit a conversation in which I never succeed doing so. If I say something critical, don't take it personally. I only mean to joke... (laughs). I would tell you more about my life. (Pause) Scratch that. I want to tell you more about my life, but I can't. I don't have the ability to treat any of you like a therapist or for that matter, treat a therapist like a therapist. I do all of my expressing through art, theatre, poetry. And that is all you need to know about me. That I am a writer. A struggling writer, but a writer. In isolation. You see I am currently... (he pauses). Never mind. I would tell you what is currently happening in the world, but I want the dramaturg to figure that out when someone produces this in the future. Gives them something to do. I guess now is as good a time as any to tell you directly that if you find fourth wall breaks to be uncomfortable or cringe-inducing, that you should leave immediately. I don't want my bow at the end to be ridden with boos by people that didn't get the message this wasn't the show for them.

(Christopher takes out a stack of papers - he sharpens a pencil. He tidies up the desk in order to give him some sort of artistic presence)

Christopher: Don't worry. This show is not going to be me just talking to you. I hope. (He puts pen to paper)

Christopher: What am I doing right now? I am writing a show. At least attempting to. I have a creative urge to write a musical. A big, extravagant, toe-tapping show about... well. I don't know yet. (He continues to write) It is doomed to fail, but that is what's great about what I do. I don't care. Well. I do. If people like it, I make a living. But what I am most concerned about is telling a story and giving the audience something they can turn to. For guidance, laughter, amusement, an escape from reality for an hour or however long. I am in the business to use what I know and the experiences I have to craft something that is, not exactly world-changing, but relevant. Relevant enough to get at least one person to listen and sit at the edge of their seat. Isn't that all we want, as writers? I guess I shouldn't say.... we. You are an audience. You, are the judge on if I am living up to what I said. I owe my life to you. (He thinks) Eh. Maybe not. On the days that I love myself the most, I don't need you, but then again those days are few in number. I constantly wish to please all of you. You are not the problem. It is the people who decide to make a living on critiquing my work. They are the end all be all. Whether it be producers, critics... you get the gist. This is my life. I have gotten used to it. But I have only gotten used to it because I love what I do.

(He stops. He stares at the audience. A laugh. He picks up his pencil and writes)

Christopher: Scene One. A roaring overture opens the show. I will write that part later. The curtain rises and on stage stands...something or someone. Something poetic. Something simple. Something that is relatable to a certain degree. Some sort of situation that anybody can relate to. Which is interesting. Everybody is so unique and diverse in their own ways, yet we can latch on to similar ideas that cross barriers and bring us together as a society. Just like a snowflake, every living thing is unique. Hmmm. That could be the basis for a song lyric.

(He opens multiple drawers trying to find a specific notepad. He finally finds it and scribbles some words down. He holds it up to the audience)

Christopher: This is a very special notepad to me. It was given to me by my father. I use it to write down ideas that I find enriching. In other words - I dump down ideas for lyrics on these sheets. I find lyrics to be the soul of a piece of music. They dictate so much. The rise and fall of the melody, the rhythm within, the style, but most importantly.... the story. I always find that the story needs to be at the forefront of any theatrical piece. Some shows rely too much on gimmicks. Who cares if you have a helicopter flying in the theater? What does having a pond on stage do to your show? Gimmicks are fine, but they have to build on a strong foundation. You have nothing if you have not a good story and you definitely do not have a good musical if you do not have songs with lyrics that drive the piece. A song needs to start at point a and end at point b. No exceptions. And all of that relies on the power of the lyrics and music combined. Enough of my rant, I have a show to write. Where was I?

(He continues writing. The stage begins to transform behind him. Becoming the world of the show he is writing. From this point on, the scenes he writes will play out on stage)

Christopher: Scene one. A family. A husband and wife with their son. A typical Friday night. (Behind him- the scene is shown- a family in front of a TV.... he begins to erase)

Christopher: Scene one. A town. Small in size, but lovingly quirky. Dysfunctional. Very dysfunctional.

(A cascade of people run-out - the town comes alive. They are dressed in vivid colors and the sets are out of this world)

Christopher: This might be too much. We'll see. Insert opening song.

(The town begins to dance in absolute silence)

Christopher: I usually get to the songs later, I just like having an outline first. They dance and dance and sing a huge opening number when suddenly... a family of three walks in. Obviously much different. Not exactly dull - black and white, but more conservative in how they dress. It comes as a complete shock and starts to drive the show. That is not exactly the wording of the stage direction, but

I wanted to make it clear for you.

(The stage clears. The ensemble stays but sits - becoming a prop for Christopher)

Christopher: Why not add the issue of change into the mix. Family, togetherness, and change. This idea is terrible and already too much, but if there is one piece of advice you take from me, it is that you should never edit yourself before it reaches the paper. Get everything out, disgusting or genius. You never know. That initial idea might become something that ends whatever you are writing or vice-versa or whatever. I feel another monologue coming on. You ready?

(The ensemble stands)

Christopher: Self-doubt and fear are the enemies of any creative creator of creations. They are our inner-demons. Inner-demons that are fueled by many years of our families and friends wondering how in god's name are we going to pull off a career in the arts. They bring up money, the economy, college, reality.... that one is my favorite. Reality. Like we are the ones floating up in the sky. Feet not touching the ground. It is absolute bull-shit. We live in reality for you to escape it. Kind of. Every Piece of theatre that works is an artistic creation that matters. No ifs or buts. They have subtextual meanings and plots that dwell on an ideal or idea. Now don't get me wrong. They can entertain and they can do it well. You might not even realize there is some hidden meaning, but the point I am trying to make, if there is a point, is that as an artist I try to speak my mind and the minds of those who need it spoken. If such ideas are spoken then into the world they go into the ears of theatre-goers who will hopefully... listen. Take a stand maybe. Perhaps that is why artists have such a tough time dealing with demons. We want our work to mean something and we are afraid that our imperfections will distract from the story we are

trying to tell. I think we are all hundred percent sure that artists are scared of imperfections, but I think it goes much deeper than that. It is my belief that everyone is put on this Earth to give back through whatever they choose to do in life. With that belief it means that every line a playwright writes, every note a composer pens, every light that is focused, every costume stitched, every anything that is done needs to leave a mark. A good mark. A positive mark. An imprint leading towards light within a very very dark tunnel. Politics aside, the world is messed up. Death, pollution, cancer, poverty, disease, the list goes on and on. I wish and hope that something I create can lead to. Well. Hope itself. I don't care what the critics say. All that matters to me is that one audience member leaves thinking. Thinking for themselves and the world around them.

(The ensemble begins to stand and head toward Christopher with a demonic aura to their actions. Tormenting him until they leave and head offstage)

Christopher: My demons keep me from doing my best work. They continuously stab me, ridicule me, tear me apart to pieces. Tell me that my existence is worthless and that my work will lead to nothing. That each word I write down - that each phrase of dialogue I pen is stupid and conceded and selfish and uninspired and messy and all I want to do is take that demon and all of its friends and punch them in the face and kick them down until they dissipate into the unknown, but that's the thing. They've won by that point. Because by that point they have gotten you to attack yourself, your work, and your reason for everything.

(Christopher takes time to reflect. He is distraught)

Christopher: I don't care what anyone says. Expressing is hard.

(Christopher gathers his papers-he throws them into a drawer. He leaves one sheet on his desk. He gets up and walks around. Pacing. Waiting for some sort of spark to hit)

Christopher: You are witnessing, writer's block. A nice sixty percent of my process is spent pacing while brainstorming the next idea. This is where I get my steps for the day. This is also where I realize that I haven't eaten anything yet today.

(From offstage - a refrigerator and table roll on)

Christopher: Lucky me.

(Christopher begins to make himself a sandwich)

Christopher: Hunger is a writer's best friend. It forces the mind to take a break and settle down for a little bit. It allows the creative juices to regenerate and hopefully start filling my head with words that I can combine together and make into something. But let me take a break for a second. Talk amongst yourselves.

(Christopher literally stands and eats his sandwich while looking at the audience. If the audience is silent, even better. He finishes)

Christopher: My sandwich making skills are getting worse each day. Where was I? (Back at desk) In this period of what I would call "mental relaxation", I have really been thinking about a father and son

bond. That deep connection that only such a relationship can bring.

(Christopher puts pen to paper. A father and son walk out and sit on opposite ends of the desk with Christopher in the middle)

Christopher: And so they speak.

Son: Dad?

Father: What is it?

Son: I think I know what I want to be when I grow up.

Father: And what is that?

Son: A writer. I want to write stuff for the theatre. Broadway!

(A pause. The son is concerned)

Son: I didn't want to tell you because I thought you would have that reaction. That's what I find the most enjoyment in and I want to pursue it.

Father: I don't care what you do. I only care that you are happy.

Son: Are you sure? It doesn't seem like that.

(The dad takes a pause. Thinking before he speaks)

Father: Who showed you all of those MGM musicals when you were a kid. Me. Who went to every night of every show you performed in high school? I did. Who took you to shows and analyzed them with you until one o'clock in the morning? I did. And every single thing I did was with love. I am not concerned about you going into theatre or the arts. I am more concerned about me.... because I am

about to lose one of my best things that ever happened to me. You are leaving soon and I can't even begin to express how much I am going to miss you. You have grown into quite the young man. I am speechless because I have nothing else to say... and no more time to say it.

Christopher and Son: I am not going away, dad. I am simply just becoming an adult. Don't worry about it.

Father: I know. I know. (He gets up to leave) I love you. I love you very very much.

Christopher and Son: (Christopher is clearly caught in a whirlwind of emotions) I love you too, dad.

(The father and son exit the stage, leaving Christopher at his desk)

Christopher: You should never take things for granted. Because, if you do, you find yourself writing something very personal that you can't fix. This whole father and son thing has been haunting me for ages, constantly pushing for something to be written about it. But I have been scared. You see, I thought I would stay close with my father. He was my everything. He made me the person I am today. He introduced me to everything that matters in my life, but I let my life get in the way. I didn't always return phone calls, I never went home. My life in the theatre became the priority and I forgot the one person that gave me the love for it. He died a year ago. Suddenly. There was no health condition, no sort of cancer, nothing. He just died. My goodbye was thousands of miles away. And that's where this scene comes to play. He always supported me, but I never said that I loved him because of that. It's another demon. Finding your personal life affects your work. Who knows, this may find its way into something. It isn't any good right now, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I found that little bit of expression to be healing. It closed a book on something that I have dwelled on for a long time now. And that is where you defeat your demon. By doing something for yourself that is unedited and matters. It clears the way for you to jump back in and write with a sense of freedom.

(He sits back to think. He gets up and begins to pace. He goes to the front of the stage. An idea has sparked in his head)

Christopher: That's reality

(He goes back to the desk and writes. It is a lyric and he recites each word - in rhythm. The ensemble comes in behind and begins to silently sing the tune)

Christopher: That's reality.

When the pavement bends and the path unwinds

And you find the meaning within your life

That's Reality

For every time you lose the might

It is there to guide you through the strife

That's reality

Sing its praise, praise its song

For reality is what keeps us going along

No matter what trials lie ahead

Believe in the belief in your head

For that's

Reality

A stage direction. The chorus lines up for a rousing final number. They look at each other with belief and joy. The strength caused by those two entities is massive. It is reality kicking in. (A pause as the orchestra strikes up) Nice idea, right?

(The ensemble comes in, joining Christopher. The desk rolls off and we see elaborate set pieces roll in. Reminiscent of the bold and dazzling Ziegfeld Follies)

Christopher and Ensemble:

It is one thing to have your feet touch the ground

It is another for your heart to sing out loud

When the pavement bends and the path unwinds

And you find the meaning within your life

That's Reality

For every time you lose the might

It is there to guide you through the strife

That's reality

Sing its praise, praise its song

For reality is what keeps us going along

No matter what trials lie ahead

Believe in the belief in your head

For that's

Reality

(After an enormous number. Christopher waves the ensemble off stage and as his desk returns - he steps in front of it. Leaning on it)

Christopher: The song needs work, but the idea is there. And that is what matters. I think why I find offense in people telling me to have my feet on the ground and to live in reality is that reality is not when you have a semi-depressing, structured, everyday life. Reality is being in tune with who you are and what gives your life purpose. Reality is recognizing what makes you, you and how recognizing that transforms your life. This is my reality. Expression is my reality. Writing is my reality. Theatre... Is my reality. I have one more lyric I would like to show you.

(Christopher takes out his notepad and begins to sing his song. A song of his love for what he does. It is simply him and a piano)

Christopher:

It's the art that drives me

Pumping my veins with music

It's the art that thrills me

Giving my soul a frame

That constant beating

The rhythm driving within

When I make, I create

and when I create I feel

And that's the beauty of art

(He smiles. He goes to sit at his desk. Putting away all of his papers except for one. He writes)

Christopher: And now for one final stage direction. Christopher stands at the front of the stage. He smiles and bows. A “thank you” and hopefully a “you’re welcome” to the audience. Lights out.

(Christopher puts the paper away. He walks to the front of the stage. For one final time, he observes the audience - taking in the atmosphere. He bows. Lights out)

END OF SHOW

Middle Scene

Characters:

Rick: Father of Sasha. Short temper, but massive heart. Rick is currently at odds with his significant other and dealing with the aftermath that is affecting their daughter, Sasha.

Sasha: Rick’s daughter. Young and impressionable, but strong in her ways. Old enough to see through stupidity. Curious and often analytical (as most younglings are). In her imagination - is quite vulgar and impolite. Embodying her parents’ crude personalities.

A bunny: A figure in Sasha’s imagination based on her father’s talk about Peter Cottontail.

(Rick opens the door to Sasha’s bedroom. Sasha remains quiet - visibly distraught by the events that have just occurred. Rick pauses for a while. Taking his time to recover from the previous events. He moves slowly to her bed - picking up a book as if he was about to read her a story.)

Rick: Have we read this one yet?

(Sasha doesn’t answer)

Rick: It seems exciting. It has a rabbit. I think rabbits are cool. Ever heard of Peter Cottontail? (Sasha

gives him a look... “What the heck, dad?”)

Rick: Obviously not. Well, when I was a boy. Your grandmother used to watch Peter Cottontail with me. It was about this bunny who was supposed to become the Chief Easter Bunny, but his nemesis, Irontail, beat him in a game where they had to see who could deliver the most eggs. Irontail made all of these eggs grey and ugly and...

Sasha: Dad, why?

Rick: Why, what?

Sasha: What is the point of all of this? I don't care about the bunny. Can we read something else? Something that I actually like?

Rick: It was just a tangent. Well, what do you want to read?

Sasha: Nevermind, I am not really in the mood, I just want to go to bed.

Rick: Are you sure?

Sasha: YES!

(A hush falls over the room. A whimpering is heard from the other room - Rick's significant other is obviously distraught)

Rick: Okay.

(Rick begins to leave the room)

Sasha: Wait.

Rick: What is it?

Sasha: Dad. You have always said not to go to bed angry.... and so.... I don't want to be angry. Rick: What do you mean?

(Sasha musters up the courage to speak what is on her mind)

Sasha: Why are you guys fighting? Do you not love each other?

Rick: We do.... We do.

Sasha: It doesn't sound like you do.

(Rick takes a pause - gathering his thoughts)

Rick: Listen closer. We might scream or yell at each other because we care about each other. You may not exactly understand it right now, but every good relationship, friendship is rooted in communication. And sometimes communication turns angry. We don't mean to yell, but we mean to speak our mind and better ourselves. If you listen, we never told each other that we hated each other...

Sasha: But you are mad and you should never go to bed mad. Dad, you always tell me that and I just want to see you try it.

Rick: I know. I know that, Sasha, but it is hard sometimes because you love the other person so much that you just don't want to end the night by forgetting what you want to tell them. And sometimes you tell them which messes everything up and you have to go to bed angry because the other is angry.

Sasha: That doesn't mean anything! You can fix it.

Rick: You have to let time work its magic.

Sasha: But I hate this. You shouldn't be fighting. You should never be fighting.

(Rick can't think of what to say. He takes a few seconds and then leans to Sasha to kiss her forehead. He moves away from the bed and Sasha rushes over to give him a goodnight hug. They embrace)

Rick: I love you. You know.... I used to sing the Peter Cottontail theme song to you as a kid. *Here comes Peter Cottontail. Hopping down the rabbit trail....*

(Rick leaves the room - singing the theme song. Sasha slowly begins to join in. She begins to settle back into her bed when suddenly a rabbit appears from the window - resembling Peter Cottontail. Sasha speaks nonchalantly to the bunny. A huge shift in the mood)

Sasha: He doesn't know shit.

Bunny: Nope. He says shit and that is about it.

Sasha: If you don't believe in going to bed angry, then why the fuck do you go to bed angry every night?

Bunny: Men.

Sasha: Men.

Bunny: Can't love them. Gotta hate them

Sasha: Yeah. Hey, remind me, "bunny dude", to not grow up straight. I can't deal with having a man in my life.

Bunny: You betcha.

(Sasha stops. She stares at the bunny in confusion)

Sasha: Are you Peter Cottontail?

Bunny: Do I look like Peter Cottontail?

(Sasha stops. This is fucking weird. She continues on and forgets the past minute or two) Sasha: Do I have a terrible dad?

Bunny: I don't know. He is your dad.

Sasha: Such a great fucking answer.

Bunny: Woah, bitch. Watch the language.

Sasha: Don't call me a bitch..... only I can cuss in my imagination.

(Sasha and the bunny sit in silence)

Sasha: This is a big question and I don't expect a great answer because you are a fake bunny, but.... What is the point of being with someone if all you want to do is change them to fit your ways?

(The bunny straightens up. The speech of the century is about to occur)

Bunny: We all want to marry ourselves. And before we can marry anyone else we have to be able to love ourselves. So in a way.... we still want to marry ourselves when we find that special someone.

(Sasha stirs in thought. Did this statement change her life..... nope.)

Sasha: You are such a basic bitch. Go put that on a quote board or something. Gosh. Just disappear if you are going to give me shitty answers like that.

(The bunny disappears. Sasha sinks into her bed. She hears her parents fighting) (She whispers)
Sasha: Oh, fuck off.

End of Scene

Mabel Shehadi

Outlaw

“Ha! I knew you would fall for it, Fletcher,” the mayor exclaimed. She snickered with satisfaction as I struggled against the two people who held me. “You know, I have been waiting so long to get you, but you kept slipping out of my grasp! Now, I finally have my moment.”

I looked to my left and saw Captain Brooker. She smirked at me, “Hello, Maud.”

I rolled my eyes, but when I turned to my right, I was in for the surprise of my life. “The Sheriff of Nottingham? You brought him? We’re enemies with that city!”

“We had a greater enemy right here,” she announced, looking me in the eye. “He’s been chasing that confounded Robin Hood for years! I figured he’d know what to do.”

“Mayor, I can tell you that even Hood is not as hideous as this fugitive is,” the sheriff began. He then whispered menacingly, “At least he never killed an innocent soul.”

I wanted to protest, but I knew it wouldn’t help. By now, the entire town gathered around to witness this spectacle. The captain turned to the mayor. “Mayor Webb...it’s your chance now,” she said with a gleam in her eye.

The mayor faced her people with the widest smile she could muster. “People of Heatherford! Thanks to some strategic planning on my part, we have captured that ghastly criminal who once haunted our dreams! She will never hurt anyone again!”

The people cheered like their lives depended on it. I then turned to the friar, hoping that at least *he* would believe it was all a lie. “Friar...”

“I’m sorry, but justice must be served,” he blurted out coldly.

“I risked getting arrested to save you!”

“The truth is...I never needed anyone to save me.”

There was a pause.

“You mean, this has all been a set up? To get me captured?” I panted. He didn’t respond.

“You are nothing more than an ingrate!” I cried. I lunged toward him, but the tightening grasp of the two who held me reminded me I was still at their mercy.

The mayor continued unfazed. “Since that dreaded night when that man, a wonderful carpenter, got killed in her infirmary by ‘accident.’ We all know what really happened.”

“She murdered him!” a woman in the crowd cried.

“She has blood on her hands!” a man chimed in.

The mayor then turned towards me with a grin, her dress flowing with her movement. “Have anything to confess, doctor, before your execution?”

With that, the captain and sheriff released me from their grip. I didn’t have time to feel relieved. My chest felt tight. My ribs were crushing my lungs every time I breathed. “I didn’t murder him,” was all I could say. I knew the reaction I would get.

“That’s what they all say before they go to the executioner,” the captain snickered.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” the mayor shouted. “After you killed that innocent man, the town lost the only doctor it had. People started leaving to live in areas where they’d have better care. Our town got even more desperate than Nottingham...No offense, sheriff.”

“No, I agree,” the sheriff nodded his head. “Our town is poor because we have lazy people who want to live off the backs of the rich, but the financial burden of your town,” he said shaking his head, “lies entirely on her shoulders.”

“I *nearly* became bankrupt,” the mayor lamented. “Thank goodness I escaped that fate ...” I could see that the impoverished crowd was staring at her, mesmerized. She noticed that and quickly redirected their attention. “...but it’s no thanks to you! You just had to ditch your morals and flee like a banshee!”

“Maybe you didn’t get so poor after all,” I said. “You don’t seem to be at a loss for words.”

“You villain!” she cried, “How dare you speak to me that way? Do you have any idea how much I’ve been traumatized by what happened?”

“Do you think it has been any easier for me?” I yelled. I then stopped and took a deep breath.

“It definitely seemed so,” she replied angrily. “Every night you’d come sneaking around our town and doing things surreptitiously while my soldiers try to get you...and every time you escape!”

I started talking in a quiet voice. "I couldn't let what happened lay to rest."

"You've sent a poor man to his *eternal* rest!" a man cried from the crowd.

But I continued uninterrupted. "All I did during those times was try to find out what really happened."

"Are you sure that's *all* you did?" a woman retorted. "Are you sure you haven't paid a visit to *my* library?"

"I...didn't steal your books," I answered calmly. I was tired of all the rage that was going on. "You're likely being sabotaged by someone else."

"Like who? Tell us!" the captain exclaimed mockingly. "If you can murder a person, siphon his blood, and keep it as a trophy, what can't you do?"

One baker came forward, and he had the guts to say, "I even heard her cackle with my own ears as she fled into the night." They seriously had turned the events of that night into a legend.

I turned to him, "Fun fact...villains don't laugh like that. Why on earth would you want everyone to hear you when you're trespassing a thin line between getting caught and running away? I'd love to congratulate the idiot who came up with that urban myth!"

"As for you," I turned to the captain, "I can't even begin to fathom how extensive your imagination must be." She just scoffed in response.

"I had to play the villain...I had to creep around, give the authorities a tough time, and evade the law. I had no choice...and I got used to it because surviving it wasn't the hard part." I then took a deep, shaky breath. "It was living with it that tortured me."

At this point, the crowd was quieter than before. "Can you imagine how hard it is to keep screaming the same confession...and people just laugh at you? I had to live knowing that I'm branded for a murder, the worst of crimes. I had to live knowing that I have disappointed the people who once trusted me. I had to live knowing that there was a man who died under my care and I never knew why."

"But you claim it wasn't you ..." the mayor said slowly.

"I never did anything to harm him, but I can't stop thinking that he...died under...*my* care. Could I have done something more? Why did he *really* die?" A strong gust of wind picked up, and my cape clapped my legs.

“You know, I kept asking myself the same thing...” the mayor began.

“I know,” I replied. The mayor looked at me in shock.

“You know?” the captain replied, alarmed.

“When he arrived at my infirmary, I realized that he was shot with an arrow made by the local armorer. The way the arrow landed, though, told me that it was an accident on her part.”

“We were fighting just before that happened,” the mayor answered.

“I also know that the reason you would only see him in secret was because you wanted to honor his wish not to participate in public life.”

The mayor froze entirely. I could almost feel her heart pounding harder. “Mayor Webb, that man was your husband,” I answered.

She started quivering. “Mayor,” I began, “I only came back because I wanted to know why. I wanted to know what happened to him. I don’t want this to happen to anyone else again. Do you believe me?”

She opened her lips and hesitated for a moment. “I know the events surrounding his death are complicated, but I can no longer ignore what’s right in front of me,” she stated, her voice breaking. She brought herself closer to me. “Fletcher, I want to believe y...”

Slice! The sound of a knife penetrating a body rang in the air, and the mayor collapsed on me. As I tried to help her up, my hands got covered with her blood.

“People! Witness the villainy of this traitor!” I was so dazed that I had no idea who was speaking at first, but it didn’t take me long to see who.

“She even killed our beloved mayor,” the captain announced. The people roared with madness. I hunched over as I tried to stand up. I was panting, but not out of fear. This time, it was pure, distilled fury that took over me.

A flashback then struck me. I remembered she once told me how much *she* deserved to overrule this town and how incompetent Webb was. Through one slick move, she can get everything she ever wanted.

“It was you!” I screamed. “You stabbed her!”

The crowd gasped.

“You must be joking! You’re the murderer here!”

“You know what?” I began in a low, intimidating voice, “I also know who killed her husband!”

I turned to the crowd. “Yes, I had to play the villain...but sometimes, it is actually your heroes,” I pointed at the captain, “who are the *real* villains.”

“You’re insane!” she shrieked.

“No, and to be honest, I haven’t felt saner in my life.”

“Down with the captain!” the people started chanting. She had finally lost her grip on the crowd.

Desperate, she pulled out a dagger. The townspeople started to panic. “You say one more word, and I will kill you!”

I swiftly raised my hand, and she froze in her place. “W-What’s happening?” she stuttered through a clenched jaw. The scene terrorized the crowd.

“I didn’t want to do this, but you compelled me!”

“You’re a witch!” she cried.

“Oh, no, no, no,” I clicked my tongue. “I’m a wizard...we’re a different breed and much more powerful than witches.”

She looked horrified.

“Many, many years ago my great grandfather pushed me to take up wizarding like him, but I couldn’t give up my dream of just using my ordinary hands to help people. I wanted to have a legitimate career like everyone else, and so I made one of the most difficult decisions in my life. I took a personal vow of abstinence and refused to practice any magic...but after what I’ve seen...that’s not happening again!”

“Your great grandfather?” she asked, trembling.

I turned my head toward a mural to my right. Her eyes followed my gaze – and what she saw made her nearly faint from shock. “Merlin? Merlin is your great grandfather?”

“Exactly! The mentor of King Arthur himself.” I then glared at the baker, who was now quivering, “So, no, I didn’t cackle, but...” I turned back at the captain, “...I will have the last laugh!”

Supernova

I’m a Supernova
Even when I Scream
The Darkness of space
Swallows the sound.

I’ve been Voyaging
For Millions of years
And never felt the Glow
Of another Star touch me.

No one has ever
Seen me Burn –
And No one
Ever will.

The Stream

There was a
Stream
That flowed like
Midnight.

It caressed the
Moon
And kissed the
Stars.

It ripened like

An iris
In the heat
Of summer.

It permeated the
Cool air
And danced with
A glare.

I have never
Seen anything
Bolder
In my
Life.

It was the
Stream
Of
Excitement
On a
Tranquil
Night.

Elsy Sierra-Valle

Circling

I'm watching my mom work her magic in the kitchen. Her hands are rapidly moving, almost floating, carrying different spices to the different workstations, effortlessly. She has years of experience making food, and I watch in amazement as she's cutting up vegetables before I can finish processing what I'm seeing. She tells me the stories of how she came to perfect these recipes, and how she never had to use measuring cups, since she 'grew up without them'. When she brings up the stories of my grandma, I immediately think back to Guatemala - the place she was raised and where I was born. "Do you ever regret it?" I ask her, and she starts slowing down.

"Regret what?" She stops for a brief moment and makes eye contact with me. I start playing with fingers, anxious of what she'll say. "Moving to the United States, leaving your family behind, having to start over." I find the courage to finally ask the question I've been meaning to ask her since I was 5 years old.

She sighs and responds, "I miss Guatemala, but we're safer here." She starts cooking again, but I'm not satisfied with the answer she gave and she could tell. "Was it hard to start a new life with nothing to our name? Yes. Was there a lot of sacrifices we all had to make? Yes."

She then went on to explain the hardships she endured in Guatemala, from the political violence to the broken justice system. I was only 15 years old at this time, and any regular teenage girl does not have a good relationship with their mom, but after this conversation, she became my new role model.

As she moves around the kitchen, I now see the weight she holds in her hands. All the stories that she has yet to tell me slow her down, yet her speed never falters.

Lauren Walther

Untitled Monologue

Carey: “Do I really know my friend?” If this has ever been something to cross your mind, I send you my condolences. And a word of warning. More often than not, your gut is right. It’s going to be tempting, being their friend despite the whispers you hear about them. They’re just so fun to be around. They meet you at a very vulnerable time in your life. They’re slightly older than you which makes them seem wiser, even if just by a small margin. They make you feel happy in a time where everything feels dark. They’re your compass when you get lost, the rock to keep you grounded, all those silly little analogies that you write on a birthday card. You feel like you could tell them anything, and you do.

(Carey looks off)

You share a lot with this person, maybe a bit too much if you’re being honest. They’re able to order your favorite meal at your go to fast food place, know just the right inside joke to spring on you when you start to think you’re alone, answer you’re bizarre 4am texts and berate you for not getting enough sleep, even though they’re losing just as much sleep as you are. You can’t imagine your life without them. You start to see them as so much more than a friend; they become part of your family. They take a seat at your dinner table and everyone starts to give them nicknames to welcome them in. You don’t think that it could get any better than this. *(Carey tunes back into their audience)*

It’s around this point that you start getting the texts and low conversations from your other friends and close family members. “Don’t you think it’s kind of weird how-” “Have you ever thought that they-” “Have you noticed how when they-” And it feels so out of left field. The shock of this seeming betrayal blinds you- how could they think those things about the person who has done so much for you, who has been there with you through thick and thin? So you defend them, almost aggressively. You double down, spending even more time with them. You isolate yourself from the people who would say such things, including your family. You miss out on celebrations with your siblings and birthdays for your other friends so that this person doesn’t feel alone. You convince yourself that they need you. So you stay with them. They get you to do things you never thought you’d ever do before. You sneak out of the house for the first time and stargaze in a park that’s closed. You do your first hard liquor shots. Even as your heart races and every inch of your body is screaming at you that what you’re doing is wrong, you do it for them. All of it- for them.

(Carey takes a deep calming breath)

Freshman year of college. That transition is what it takes for you to start seeing the cracks in their facade. Suddenly, the new friends you’re making are trying to steal you away from them. They begin to nitpick each and every new person you meet and tell you they’re no good. It’s slow going but you begin to ask the same questions everyone had asked years before. With the space between the two of you, the rose tint begins to fade. You find yourself not wanting to answer their texts right away. When they ask when you’ll be home for break to hang out, you lie. You tell them your family wants to spend time

with you, you have work, it just won't work out this time. You even go so far as to park your car a block away from your house so that in case they drive by, they won't know you're home. That summer, everything feels wrong. When you finally do hang out, it's because the lies have run out. There's no fun anymore, just... existence in the same space. Now that you're back with them, the rose tinted glasses haven't returned and you feel like you're talking to a completely different person. They start to comment on your likes and hobbies in ways that make you feel bad about what you're doing. They call your siblings names and critique the rituals you've had in place with them since you were born. You accidentally do something to piss them off and they treat you like a child about to be grounded. The next few days are radio silent. It's about time for you to go back to school and they reach out, but not to apologize. Instead, they tell you that you can't be upset with them because their bipolar was just really bad that day. I'm sorry- what? So, you just get to shit on me for a mistake I made, and you're not even going to apologize for it? Your mental health is not an excuse to make me feel like dogshit!

(Silence as Carey recuperates herself)

You think it's over. You go back to school and they don't talk to you for a while. A few 'Happy [insert holiday] texts here and there, but nothing of substance. The friends that you made your freshman year become your new circle, your new home away from home and your gut isn't trying to warn you this time. This time you're safe. You think about that other person less often as your classes and breaks go by. You see, most friendships that don't continue into adulthood, just fizzle out. It's not like the movies where there's a climactic shouting match where they both walk away in the rain. No, in the real world they send you a text; "Are you awake? We need to talk." You sigh, get up off the couch, excuse yourself from your new group of friends, and walk up and down the hallway. The conversation is stale, the usual "how are you" and "what's class like." They don't get to the point and it begins to piss you off, but you hold your tongue, waiting. You can tell there's something they want to ask you as a grand finale but they want you to coax it out of them. You don't give them the satisfaction. Finally it comes, "I'm getting married, would you be my maid of honor?"

...

What do you say? To this person who you've been growing distant from for years, who you've heard berate and scorn your family and friends, who has, in hindsight, been manipulative under the guise of friendship. Excuses race through your mind, "It's too expensive," "I've got work," but instead, you say "I think you should find someone better suited to be your maid of honor. I

can't be that for you." The call ends with half-hearted goodbyes. You- I haven't spoken to them since. I still think of them every once in a while. With every red Honda Civic that drives by, every American Spirit cigarette smoked in an alley, and every time I go home, the fear of seeing them again is palpable. How should I react if I see them again? You know, they still like my instagram posts and my goofy tweets. Not *one* message. In some twisted way, I'm still waiting for them to talk to me again. I'm still waiting for my shouting match in the rain. I'm still wondering, where did it all go wrong? Did I ever really know them?

Joey Winton

Article

In a recent report from the Crime and Justice Institute, Nebraska's prison population has increased more than 21 percent over the last ten years and has been over capacity since 1982.

According to [KLIN.com](#), the goal of the report was to identify ways to reduce the prison population, which has reached 149.8 percent of the system's designed capacity.

The report- which has not yet been made public- shows that long sentences and mandatory minimums to certain crimes are contributing to overcrowding. Additionally, it states that low-level, non-violent felony sentences are given consecutively, resulting in a longer prison sentence.

With the increasing population of Nebraska's prisons, guards and other employees are not properly staffed, resulting in longer shifts and an inability to properly do their jobs.

According to [Nebraska Public Media](#), the cost of the overtime pay of employees alone rounds out to \$31 million in taxpayer dollars.

The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services' (NDCS) annual overtime spending has almost tripled in the last decade, reaching \$15.7 million in 2020.

Aside from the financial cost, the level of safety for both prisoners and guards has dropped significantly as overcrowding makes it difficult to stop assaults on prisoners and staff. It is also harder to search for weapons and drugs, and prisoners are kept in cramped, overcrowded cells for potentially days at a time.

The Diagnostics and Evaluation Center- where new prisoners begin their sentences- is designed to hold 160 people, but is being used to hold around 500 prisoners, more than triple its intended capacity. For every two-man room in the Center, four prisoners are kept. Prisoners who cannot fit in cells are housed in large rooms, forced to sleep on plastic cots with a thin mat on the inside. The prison gym is also reportedly being used as a location for cots.

During lockdowns, inmates are either confined in their room with three other cellmates or are among one of the hundreds of others locked in a tightly packed dorm.

Former inmate Ryan Shannon- who was incarcerated at the State Penitentiary in 2019- said he was housed in a similar dorm, where 200 men slept in a room filled with rows of plastic cots that were stacked up during the day. Shannon describes feeling "like rats in a cage" during lockdowns because of the lack of space.

Debra Johnson- a mother of another Nebraska prisoner- says her son at the penitentiary in Tecumseh is one of three prisons that moved under a regular three-day lockdown schedule. Her son describes the three-day lockdown as mentally and physically exhausting, saying it "is just too much. Even if they'd get it down to two days, anything would help."

This schedule, also adopted by the Lincoln prison and the Diagnostic and Evaluation Center, was introduced in hopes of staff being better distributed throughout the week. As a result of this, every Thursday night, all inmates at these three locations are locked in their cells or rooms until Monday morning.

During the lockdown period, prisoners are not able to exercise because there is not enough space in the cell but also because everyone in the cell would have to live with the smell. Prisoners are typically let out for 20 minutes over the course of the weekend for a shower, but some have resorted to makeshift baths. Doug Koebernick- inspector general of the Nebraska Correctional System- describes prisoners bathing in their cells “like a birdbath using the sink.”

Other aspects the weekend lockdowns impact are medication schedules (most notably sleep and psychiatric medications), time for programming and other classes (provided the facility has enough staff to accompany instructors and volunteers) and visitation hours among other things.

Inmates are not able to see visitors on weekends, a time when most working families have time off and would be able to visit. In total, the inmates at Tecumseh, the Diagnostic and Evaluation Center and the Lincoln Correctional Center comprise around 40 percent of Nebraska’s male prison population. According to [Nebraska’s official Corrections site](#), in May of 2021, there were approximately 5,304 people in all correctional facilities across the state, but that number is likely higher today.

The lack of staff and resources also impacts the lives of the guards at these places, as they are forced to work extended hours.

Laura Sanchez, a former correctional officer who left the department in July 2021, said she would work anywhere from 70 to 80 hours a week and would sometimes have to work 16-hour shifts with no prior warning. Her mandatory overtime was so frequent that she lost custody of her two children.

“The judge told me that my job was too demanding, he simply said ‘I’m sorry that the state is doing this to you,’” Sanchez said.

Both the State Penitentiary and Tecumseh have been on 12-hour shifts since late 2019 in an effort to maximize their small staff. This 12-hour shift was never meant to be in effect for this length of time, according to Department of Corrections Director Scott Frakes.

In an attempt to provide relief for the prison staff and prisoners, Gov. Pete Ricketts is proposing a 1,500-bed maximum security facility to replace an aging State Penitentiary.

According to [KETV](#), the Nebraska Department of Corrections places the estimated cost at around \$190 million to update the State Penitentiary to adhere to current standards.

While Ricketts believes that “by building a new modern facility we’ll be able to help facilitate programming for the inmates. We’ll improve the safety for not only the inmates, but for our teammates,” others are not as convinced that this is the best way to combat prison overcrowding.

State Senator and Chairman of the Legislature’s Judiciary Committee Steve Lathrop believes Nebraska has two options and considers one to be the correct route to go down.

“[We can] take a course where we build and build and build to try and keep up with the prison population or do we want to do what other states have done, which is to look at the system and find out if there’s a better way,” Lathrop said.

Lathrop, using a study from the JFA Institution done for the NDCS in 2020, asserts that the current prison population is expected to climb to over 7,300 by 2030.

“As soon as we get done with that [prison], we will be overcrowded and will need to build more space,” Lathrop said.

However, Ricketts stated that a new union contract- which boosts corrections wages- is showing promise as facilities have seen an increase in applicants.

“We’re getting about three times the number of applicants that we were before. When we get more staff in, that helps us to be able to do more programming, and that will help make sure that the inmates can reach their parole eligibility date and parole,” Ricketts said.

While Ricketts is primarily focused on updating prison facilities, he is not opposed to doing more to assist inmates after they’ve been released.

“The key is providing supports for people who are leaving the system or who were on probation. So whether that’s mental health or housing or something like that, that’s one of the things I think we can look at,” Ricketts said.

Lisa Zysset

Someday

When Today is shrouded in shadow
I cry for Someday to save me.

Someday dances on the horizon
Out of earshot, she cannot hear my plea.
I watch as she glides. Closer?

Someday laughs as she struggles
To balance the abundance of gifts she carries
In her arms.
The joy spills from her embrace
Like light beams.

I hear Someday singing,
Her song carried on the wind.
Spin! She trills. Spin!

Turning, I am greeted by countless
Yesterdays
All varied in temperament and color.
Each one familiar.

Yesterday stretches her whole body on the ground
Eager to touch each blade of grass
In peaceful intimacy with the earth.

Yesterday bends to pluck a beetle from a flower
Crunching its hard shell between her fingertips
In cold-hearted indifference for the innocent creature.

Yesterday leaps into the sky
Suspended for a moment in the clouds
In exuberant praise for life itself.

Yesterday curls, knees tucked to chin,
Nestled unmoving in the speckled shade of an oak
In overwhelming sorrow for all that is lost.

Shadows shift
Drawing my attention back to Today.

Today stands rigidly, spine and limbs firmly fixed in soldier stance.
Her eyes reflect the waving prairie in which she stands
But they do not see it.

I whisper to her.
Yell!
Do something!!

Nothing.

An arm on my shoulder.
The comforting weight and slight squeeze draw me in.
Tomorrow smiles softly.
With gentle pressure and a knowing expression,
She guides me forward.

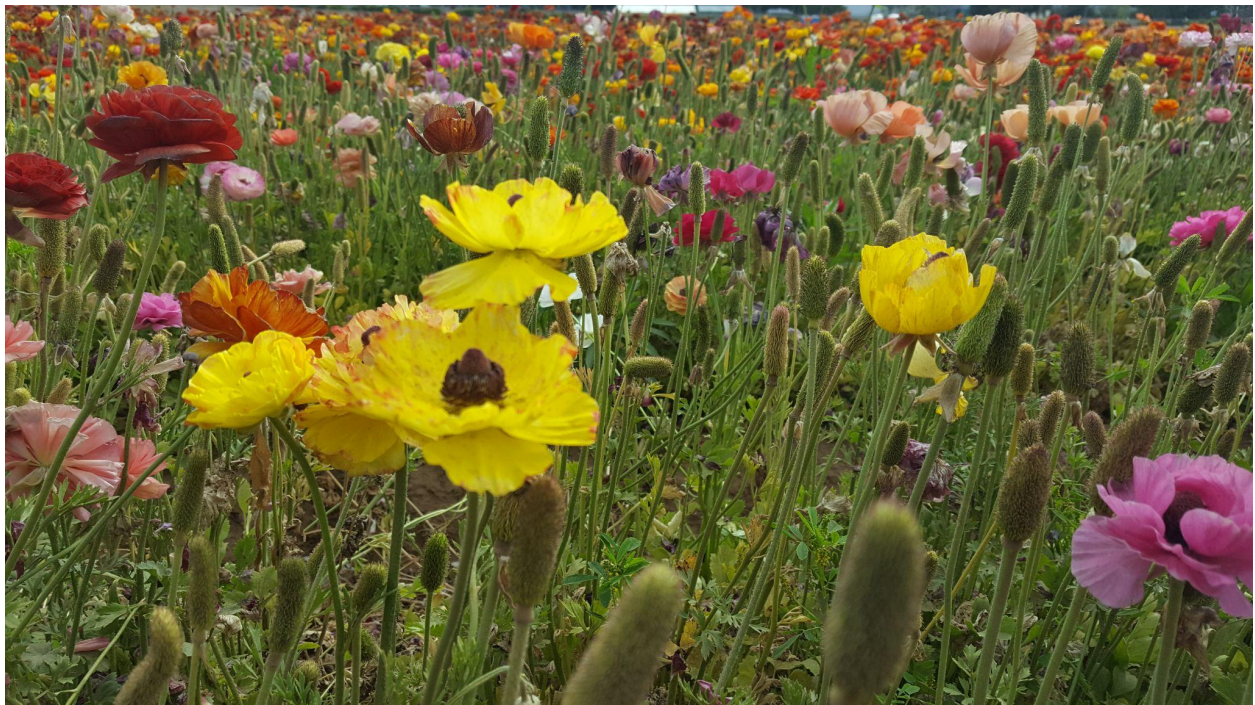
And I see
Someday.
Someday is dancing on the horizon.

Art & Photography

Ali Clendenin



Carlsbad CA Flower Fields Panorama



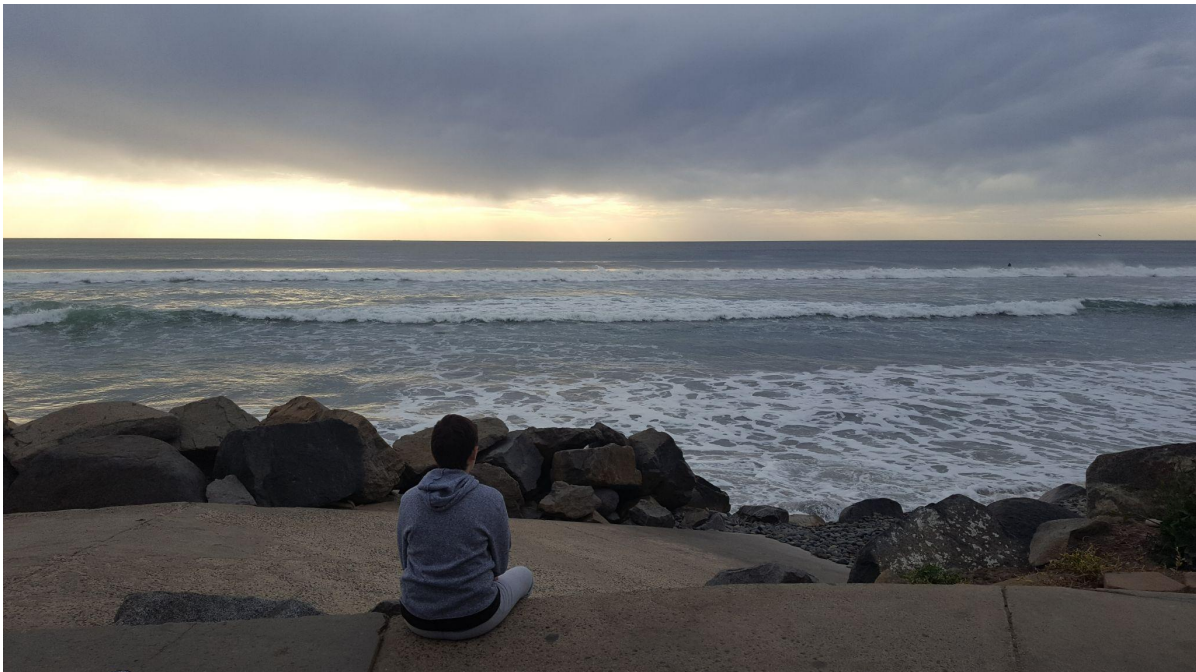
Carlsbad CA Ranunculus Flower Fields



Carlsbad CA Strawberries



Green Valley Lake CA



Oceanside CA Pensive Storm



Oceanside CA Sunset Pair



Oceanside CA Sunset Silhouette



Oceanside CA Sunset Sky Pair



Oceanside CA Surfer Silhouette

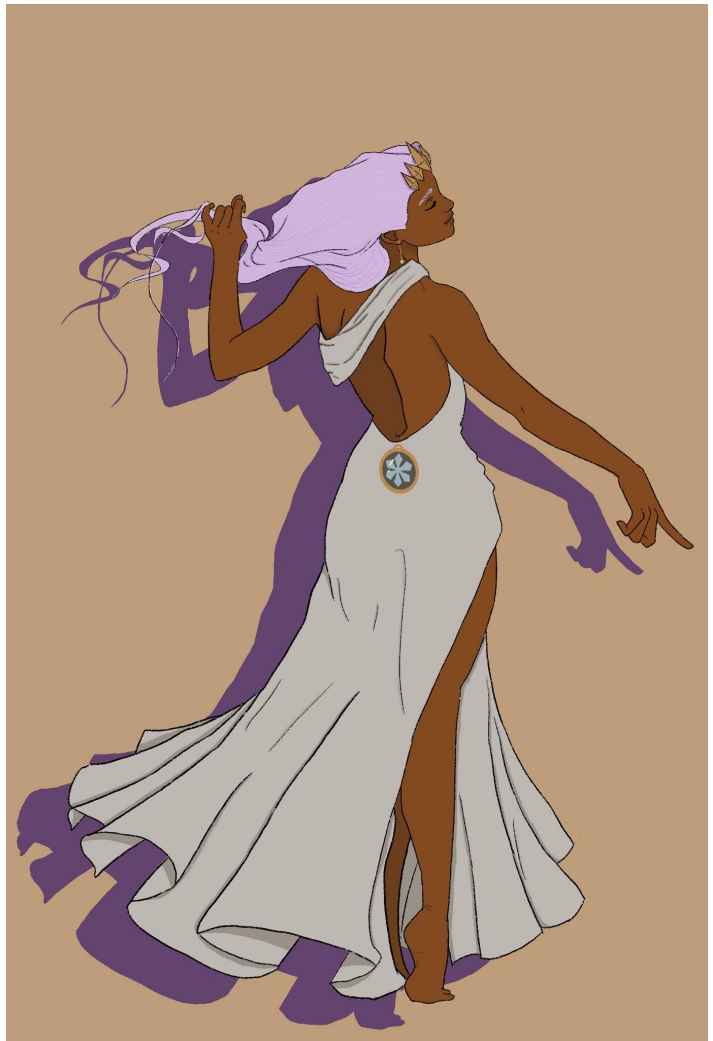


Running Springs CA

Savannah Householder



Adventure Ready



Dancing Alone

Felipe Lozano Merizalde



Untitled 3D Art Piece #1



Untitled 3D Art Piece #2



Untitled 3D Art Piece #3

Brooklyn Mercurio



Armadillo



Hands in Action



Painting



Untitled Painting

Alexa Munsinger



Dancing in the Rain



Daphne the Astronaut



Strawberry Chef Kitty



Goddus Annus



Pollution Plague Birds



Peanut Butter Lab

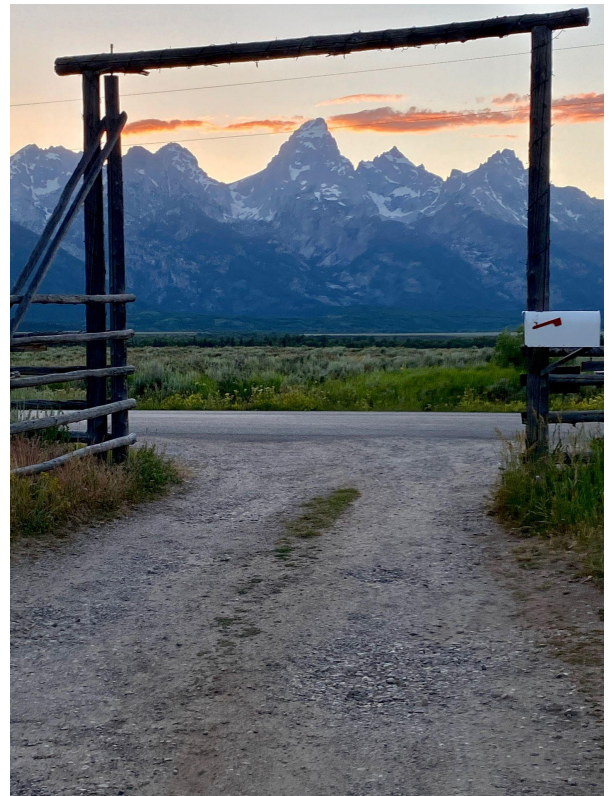


Drowning in Your Head

Carrie Rath



Untitled Photo #1

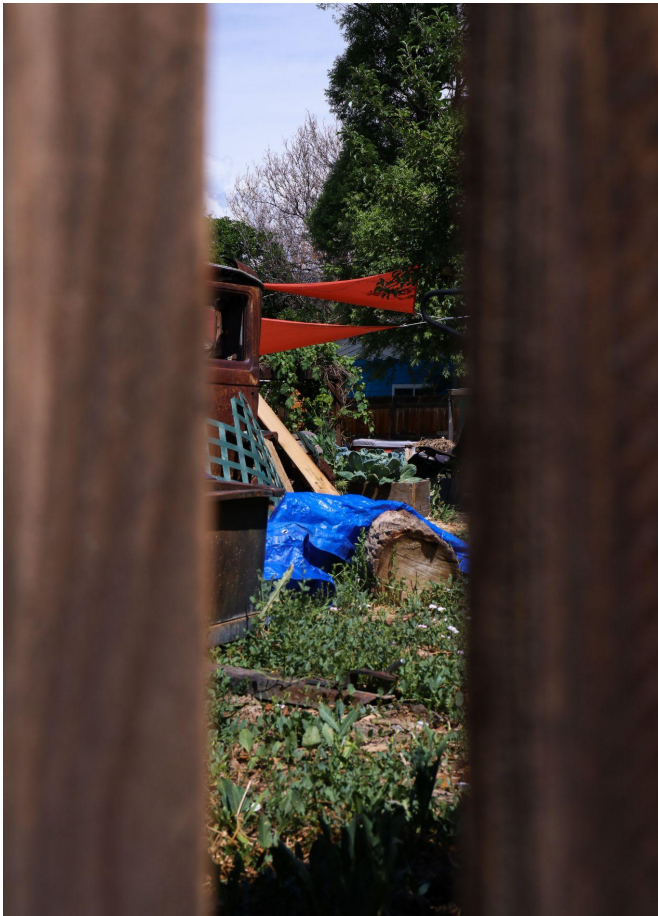


Untitled Photo #3



Untitled Photo #2

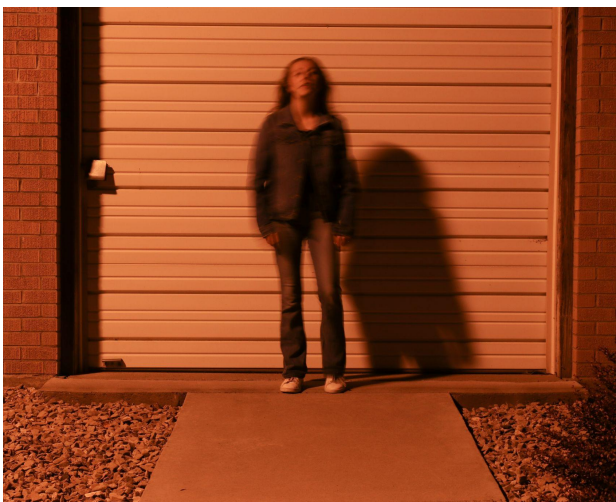
Abby Reedy



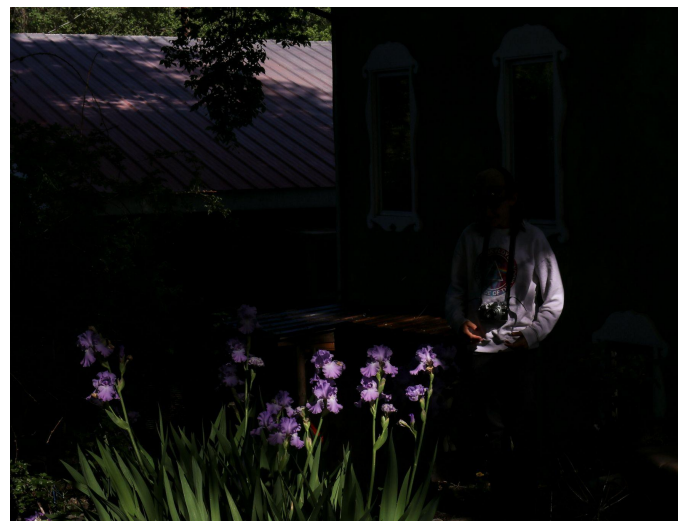
Untitled Photo #1



Untitled Photo #4



Untitled Photo #2



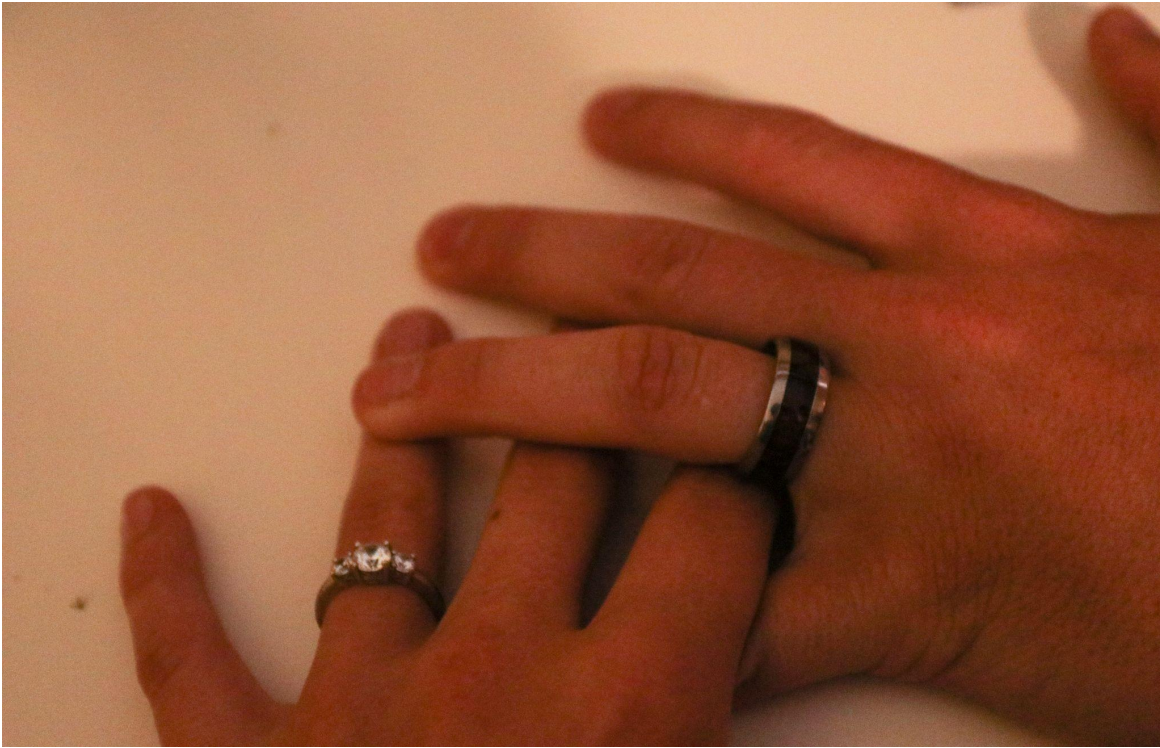
Untitled Photo #3



Untitled Photo #5



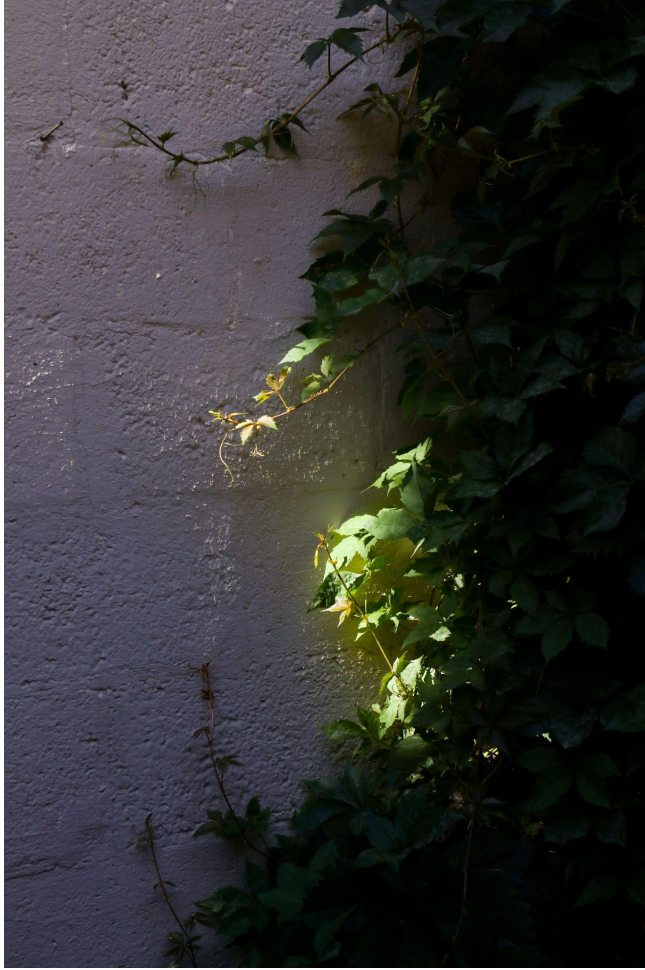
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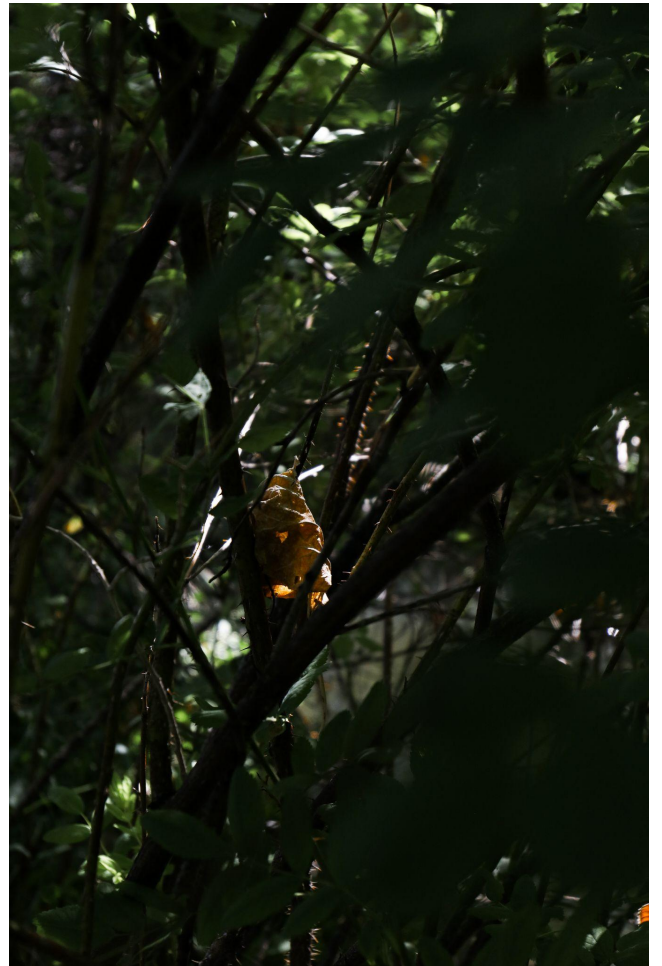
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Untitled Photo #8



Untitled Photo #9



Untitled Photo #10



Untitled Photo #11



Untitled Photo #12



Untitled Photo #13



Untitled Photo #14



Untitled Photo #15



Untitled Photo #16



Untitled Photo #17



Untitled Photo #18

Emma Ryan



Blossom



Confined



Holiday Goodies



Hanging by a Thread



Intuition



Maturation



Rumination



Shimmer



Stifling



Strung Out



Unearthed

Mabel Shehadi



Untitled Photo

Kaidan Smith



Cowboys in the Sun

Jax Stander



Charcoal Carrie Fisher



Charcoal Self Portrait



Minecraft Chest



Mini Bob Ross

Myles Wheatley



Incomplete Sketch



Sketch of Myself

Joey Winton



Charlie Parker



Dexter Gordon



John Coltrane



Sonny Rollins



Lester Young



Stan Getz

Guest Writer Bio:

Doug Christensen served as Commissioner of Education (Nebraska) for 14 years after serving roles as teacher, principal, superintendent and university instructor. He joined the Department of Education in 1990 serving as Associate Commissioner and Deputy before being appointed Commissioner in 1994.

Dr. Christensen has been recognized for his leadership as Administrator of the Year (Kansas), Superintendent of the Year (Nebraska) and Public Official of the Year (*Governing Magazine*). His recent awards include Friend of Education (Nebraska State Teachers Association), Distinguished Service Award (Nebraska Council of School Administrators), Intellectual Freedom Award (National Council of Teachers of English), Transformational Leadership Award (Coalition of Essential Schools), and the prestigious Grace Abbott Award recognizing his leadership in early education by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

He has been a keynote speaker and presenter at conferences including speaking at Columbia University, the National Council of Teachers of English National Conference, the Council of Chief State School Officers Policy Forum, the NEA Scholars Institute and Executive Leadership Conference, the Coalition of Essential Schools Annual Conference, the Schlechty Institute Leaders Academies and the Education Commission of the States. In addition, he has authored numerous state level and national level publications appearing in state and national journals including KAPPAN, Education Leadership, Ed Week, and District Administrator.

Dr. Christensen is Emeritus Commissioner of Education a title conferred by the State Board of Education in June, 2008. He was appointed Professor of Leadership in Education for the Graduate Division of Doane College and has designed a leadership program for professionals seeking the endorsement as a superintendent of schools. He also

designed an EdD degree program for the college which has received accreditation approval and will begin in January of 2016.

He currently is President elect of PDKIntl and will become Chairman of the Board in July, 2015. He serves as chair of the Board of Directors of the Nebraska Children's Foundation in Nebraska.

“How lucky I am to have something that
makes saying goodbye so hard.”

A.A. Milne



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