THE GREAT LAKE REVIEW
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Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego, the River’s End Bookstore is GLR’s off-campus home. Every year the River’s End holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore, especially Bill and Mindy.

THANK YOU RIVER’S END!
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*The winner was chosen by SUNY Oswego’s Film Club.
The R Word
Elsa Nieder

You survived. You repeat that to yourself some days, just so you can remember that it could be so much worse. The nightmare ended, eventually. You were capable of leaving it in the past. So what if you still have lingering mental illness? So what if you find yourself reliving horrible memories in graphic detail at the worst possible moments? So what if you still can’t say the R word, unless you’re singing that one Nirvana song (which you do, just so you can remember you’re “not the only one”)? You survived. You survived. You survived.

But some days, you still wish that you didn’t.

It isn’t that you don’t want to be alive. That’s not the truth at all. You love your life and nothing could ever change that for you. The memories you carry with you don’t discourage you from living in any sense. It’s just that sometimes – not too often, but sometimes – you feel the negative effects of the past weigh too strongly on the present. And while the negative things don’t overpower the positive things, they sometimes make the positive things harder to see.

Because you know that you’re always going to have those moments – the moments where the memory comes back to you much too vividly despite your attempts to push it away and leave it in the past. You’re pulled back, inexplicably, into a grungy basement. The concrete walls, the never-once-vacuumed rug, and the perpetual stuffiness – it’s suddenly all too real. You can see smoke curling through the air above you, breathed out in a last, desperate prayer. You can hear shouting seeping downward through the floorboards and shouting right in front of you. You’re thrown upwards, through two floors, into a dark bedroom. You’re fifteen. There’s a weight on your chest. You’re lying on your back...

At fifteen, before all of this, you were like a lot of people – you felt depressed, misunderstood, and alone. You probably could have coped with it – or at least done better than you did. You could have stuck to your regiment of watching Netflix, reading everything you owned, and writing angsty poetry in the early hours of the morning. But you didn’t want too.

It was inevitable that you would develop some form of interest in him. A seventeen-year-old boy seemed so exotic to you. He was going into his senior year of high school, he played the bass, and he seemed to have invested more than a casual amount of interest in you. That’s the dream, isn’t it?
You stayed up until four every night, talking to him. You talked over AIM – it was 2011, after all, and all forms of instant messaging were not yet outdated. You saw each other every week or so, at the beginning – and at church no less, a testament to how absolutely you could trust him. He was perfect for you, or so you kept telling yourself; he was exactly what you wanted and needed this entire time. When he finally asked you out, he told you that he was serious about the relationship. He was “done playing games.” At fifteen, you could not have asked for more. Everything was going perfectly.

Until, of course, everything went completely wrong. And as soon as everything went wrong, you started to forget.

You’ve never been sure of exactly how quickly you forgot everything. All you know for sure is that the memories disappeared almost as soon as they happened. You didn’t remember biting back tears and the feeling of your mind racing as you tried to figure out what to do. You didn’t recall the way your heart seemed to break in that moment as you realized how wrong you’d been about someone who meant the world to you. Instantly and inexplicably the memories had vanished.

And for the next two years, through the course of what became an incredibly toxic and emotionally abusive relationship, the memories stayed gone. It wasn’t until the relationship was over, when you described the event to your sister, that you finally fully remembered.

You didn’t know why you started to tell her. At the time you didn’t know exactly what it was you were telling. It was in your mind and yet still you didn’t understand exactly what the memory meant. You felt tears begin to run down your face as you talked and in the moment you questioned why you were crying. Then you noticed your sister’s face – the look of absolute horror she wore as she listened to your story.

That was when you suddenly knew.

The realization was a horrifying one. To suddenly recall a two-year-old memory of something so life changing, you didn’t know how to deal with it. You lost a lot of sleep. You lay awake at night wondering if it happened, how it happened, why it happened. In the end, the vague memories were the only answers you had. You guess they are all that you need.

You feel like everyone who looks at you can see what happened. Like they’re all seeing through you, witnessing something so personal that you’ve only spoken it out loud once in your life. It makes you feel entirely exposed, entirely vulnerable. You hear the R word and you feel like every eye in
the room turns to you. Your face gets hot. You make an effort not to seem affected, not to make it more obvious than you’re sure it already is. You feel like you have the R word written in permanent ink across your forehead – no matter how hard you try, that ink will never wash off.

These feelings, however, seem always to bring with them the recollection that you are so incredibly lucky. Not because of what happened, of course, but because of all the things that could have been so much worse. You’re told very frequently how lucky you are (although generally it’s due to your tendency to win raffles and find expensive watches on sidewalks), but nothing makes it more obvious to you than the sound of your own heartbeat. It sounds corny and cliché and it shocks you that it’s so true. Sometimes you just listen to it. You feel your pulse and every single fiber of you thanks every deity in real or fictional existence that your heart is still beating.

That’s something you never would have imagined about the R word. You imagined that it would carry with it a lifetime of pain and regret, but – for you at least – it doesn’t. The things that you went through gave you a glimpse into some of the worst parts of life. But instead of forcing you to get lost in negativity, they opened you up to seeing some of the best parts of life. Every beautiful day, every kind stranger – you can’t take these things for granted anymore. For you, every second comes with the appreciation that you were here to experience that exact second. And now, as you sit in silence, the afternoon sun feeling just a little too bright as it slants through the glass on your window, Nirvana playing softly on your laptop, you can feel your pulse in your wrists. No matter how bad it gets, moments like this are perfect to you. Because they remind you again that you survived. You survived. You survived.
Tell Me Why You Have To Stay  
Brenna MacIsaac

I.  
She is my life and I won’t live without her.

II.  
I know he will change. I know he’s the boy I met on the 10th floor in the dorm. 
He gave me strawberries for Valentine’s Day.

III.  
She can’t wear that.

IV.  
I know he didn’t mean to. He wouldn’t bruise my chin purple and red for a tank top. 
He wouldn’t, I know.

V.  
She’s a slut and I will not see her with anyone else. 
I dare you to look at her.

VI.  
I can’t make excuses. I can’t tell you why my hand went through a window and it looked like bright red sponges were being forced out of the cuts and how I had to go to the hospital for stitches at 3 in the morning, or why I had to cancel lunch. Why I can’t go with my sister to the store.

VII.  
I will not live without her.

VII.  
I am a hermit crab and he is my shell. 
I have to stay with him.
I sat under the kitchen table's light
that night, smoking and drinking,
for it was the only light left
in the house.

My little old dog appeared from
the shadows with her tail between
her legs, far past her bedtime.

I cradled her in my bare arms.  
She was blind and deaf and dying
and smelled the beer on my lips and
wouldn't kiss me.
Narcoleptic Insomniac
Julia Brennan

Night. Headlights move across the walls. I’m wide awake. I climb out of bed, jostling him as I do so. Quietly, I play Wagner and waltz with the shadows. The music swells and I sigh as it caresses me. He groans and places a pillow over his head.

Day. I spoon peanut butter into my mouth with a finger, straight from the jar. He won’t drive me to work anymore. I make him late. The hard bench at the bus stop feels heavenly. I’m dead tired. My head bobs forward. Sleep. When I awaken, my skirt is streaked with peanut butter. The jar sits in the street. I’m late for work.

Night. I stare into the bathroom mirror. Tug at the bags under my eyes. Foundation. Eye liner. Mascara. Blush. Uncap a tube of red lipstick and glide it across my mouth. I smack my lips and kiss the mirror like a lover until I’m gasping for breath. The girl in the mirror gazes at me through streaks of red. “Lovely,” she tells me.


Night. The tide strokes the shore. It’s lovely. Where he is doesn’t matter. Deep breath. Dive.

Day. I jingle my keys while reading the morning paper. He never liked it, but I’ll do it forever.
FADE IN:

INT. AI’S BEDROOM - NIGHT

There is a distant BEEPING in the b.g. The room is lit by moonlight from an open window. A dresser stands in a corner of the room next to a bed; a phone, lamp, and a newspaper on top of it. The newspaper title reads:

INFAMOUS MURDERER “THE IMPERSONATOR” ESCAPES INSANE ASYLUM!

On the front cover creepily grinning and covered in blood is SEBASTIAN EDWARDS (35), a psychopathic former ventriloquist.

In the bed lies AI FALLON (35), a brave yet paranoid Japanese doctor, and her husband, MARTIN FALLON (36), a lax yet hardworking police officer, who is asleep under the covers.

Ai twists and turns in bed, her body enveloped in sweat. Martin grumbles and envelops himself even more in the blankets. Ai’s chest leaps forward, her eyes wide open.

MARTIN
(grumbles under covers)
You okay, Ai?

AI
I had a nightmare about... him.

MARTIN
(groggy)
Who? Your ol’ stalker? That killer ventriloquist guy, Sebastian?
AI
Yes, him... I was in Lola's body
and he came here and killed you and
then he killed the actual me and-

MARTIN
(half-asleep)
-Settle down. It was just a dream.

Ai heavily BREATHERS. Martin pulls the blankets more over him.
The BEEPING continues in the b.g. Ai looks towards the door.

AI
Martin, do you hear that beeping?

MARTIN
(yawns)
Sounds like the oven.

AI
Can you go check it?

MARTIN
It's just the oven, hon.

AI
I just had a nightmare and you want
me to go down there to turn it off?

MARTIN
Calm down. It's not like someone's
in the house.

AI
(pouts)
Fine. I'll be right back.
She gets out of bed and opens the dresser drawer. She digs through undergarments and pulls out a pistol. She grabs her phone off the dresser, puts it in her pocket, then closes the drawer.

**INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - SECONDS LATER**

Ai clenches the gun and copiously looks around as she walks down the dark hallway towards the stairs. The BEEPING gets louder with every FOOTSTEP.

She looks over the banister down at the dark living room. She looks up once she’s reached a door. She opens it and glances inside.

**INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY/LOLA’S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

LOLA FALLON (5) lies in her bed snuggled against a stuffed animal. Ai smiles from outside the door and walks on.

**INT. STAIRCASE - CONTINUOUS**

Ai walks down the stairs. Her eyes scan the area around her. The BEEPING gets louder and louder.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Ai walks through the dark living room. Nothing can be seen except a faintly open old wooden door full of cracks beside a television that she passes without notice.

**INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS**

The oven is wide open, letting an orange light out into the room. The BEEPING is the loudest here. Ai grabs the oven door and closes it. The BEEPING stops. She calmly EXHALES. She turns to see written on the wall in red:

YOU’RE MINE

The words bleed down the wall and into each other.
AI

No.

She runs out of the room past a before unseen blood trail leading back to the old door.

**INT. LOLA’S BEDROOM - SECONDS LATER**

Ai runs into Lola’s bedroom and rolls the girl over. Lola mumbles and rolls back onto her side. Ai smiles, but the smile fades quickly. She sprints out of the room.

**INT. AI’S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Ai bursts into the room. She grabs and shakes her husband.

**AI**

(screams)

MARTIN! MARTIN!

The covers withdraw and Sebastian lies under them, smiling. Ai tries to get away only to fall backwards onto her butt.

**AI (CONT’D)**

No.

**SEBASTIAN**

I found you.

He gets up from the bed and withdraws a knife from beside him. Blood covers and leaks from the blade and one of his hands. Ai gets up and backs away. She shakes as she tries to aim the pistol at him.

**SEBASTIAN (CONT’D)**

Aren’t you happy to see me, Ai?

**AI**

I-I was just talking to Martin. Where is he? How’d you...
SEBASTIAN
(laughs and mimics
Martin's voice)
Just an ol’ act I used to do.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS
Ai backs out into the hallway towards the banister. Sebastian follows her, shining his demented smile upon her.

SEBASTIAN
I’ve missed you, Ai. We haven’t seen each other since, what? College? Oh yes! I remember, that was back when I thought you were mine! If not for you meeting Martin-fucking-Fallon you still would be.

AI
You stalked me for three years, and-

Her back hits the banister. The gun shakes in her hands.

SEBASTIAN
Oh, Ai. I know you love me. Martin's gone now, it's okay. It's just us and Lola just like it was meant to be.

AI
(screams)
I don’t love you and I never will!

SEBASTIAN
(stops)
Are you saying that you rather him over me?
Ai gulps, then nods. Sebastian lunges at her. She pulls the trigger. The gunshot RINGS as his body SLAMS into hers. Their bodies fall over the banister.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ai's back slams against the ground and she SCREAMS in pain, Sebastian on top of her. She pushes him off with all of her might, revealing a huge bloodstain on his stomach. He grabs his stomach and gets up. He leans down and yanks Ai up by her hair, lifting her from the ground.

SEBASTIAN
If you want to be with him so much-

He MOANS as he turns and pulls open the door beside the television. He thrusts her forward and turns on the light.

SEBASTIAN (CONT’D)
-I’ll let you.

There are stairs in front of her that lead down into the basement. Lying at the bottom is Martin in a bloody mess, a smile etched across his neck, a heart cut into the center of his chest, and his stomach open for the world to see.

Sebastian puts the knife to her throat. She thrusts her elbow backwards into his stomach. He falls back and she turns around, grabs him and throws him down the stairs. He TUMBLES as she turns, closes the door and locks it.

She puts her back to it and EXHALES. She pulls her phone out of her pocket and dials ‘9-1-1’. The stairs CREAK behind her.

9-1-1 DISPATCHER
9-1-1, what’s your emergency?

AI
Hello, I-
The knife slides through a crack in the door and smoothly glides through the back of Ai’s neck, coming out of the other side, glistening with Ai’s juices. She gurgles and chokes on her blood as it begins to engulf her neck and clothes.

The knife pulls back and she falls forward. The doorknob jiggles for a few seconds, then the door opens. Sebastian steps out, holding his bloody stomach. He picks up the phone.

**SEBASTIAN**

(mimics Ai)

Never mind. We handled it.

He ends the call, throws the phone to the ground, and breaks it with a few STOMPS. He painfully BREATHES for a couple seconds.

**LOLA (O.S.)**

Who are you?

He looks up at the banister to see Lola looking down at him.

**SEBASTIAN**

Why, hello, Lola.

**FADE TO BLACK.**
Golden
Breanna Johnson

I saw proof of God
In the Fibonacci curve of your supple, rose petal lips
The way the splattered stars
Kiss her freckled cheeks

Her obsidian dress collapses to the floor
The moon disrobes the cloud
Wraps herself in ivory sheets

Her eyes resembling milked ash
She whispers porcelain lies
Of how she'll stay this time
Her body blooming with desire

Maroon kisses trailing down my neck
In eve evanescent
The sun kisses the horizon

She reapplies her lipstick in the mirror
Her fingers gliding through her halo of golden strands
O’ how lovely it is to see
Ghost
William Ramirez
“I don’t know. I don’t really feel anything about it.”
My newly found therapist’s mousy face twisted into a disapproving expression and it was immediately clear that she was dissatisfied with my response to her question. The neon red numbers on her analog clock glowed tauntingly at me, a constant reminder that I was barely halfway through the appointment I’d been forced into attending.
“You don’t feel anything towards the current state of your sister?”
I wasn’t sure if her feisty tone was intentional or not (it probably was; she was surely displeased with my lack of cooperation), but I still managed a shrug of my shoulders as a reluctant answer.
Regardless, it was true. I didn’t feel anything about it. I was numb. I was done. I wanted nothing to do with her.
Some people believe my sister, Jen, hit rock bottom that month, and I knew our relationship was far beyond repair in that moment. I had never really properly dealt with the incarceration of my sister. Truly, I just remember coming home from school thinking that it was a normal Tuesday afternoon.
The sun was shining brightly, spilling over onto the concrete sidewalks of my average Bronx neighborhood. It was May. Kids were excitedly running through the steel doors of the bright blue building I’d spent nearly three and a half years at so far. They either continued towards the park to play basketball or walked down the block to buy pizza or a bagel since school lunch was just that bad. I did neither that day. I waited for my friends before proceeding to get on the bus, mindlessly looking out the window, watching the busy neighborhood as we sped by.
In May of my junior year, I was already beyond stressed about SATs, ACTs, and college applications. It seemed as though every question anyone asked me had to do with my future and what colleges I was interested in. As of currently, I was in a dark place due to the thought of having to figure out my impending college career. I felt as though my entire academic livelihood was peaking and I had no choice but to go through the motions, never once questioning my mental health state or asking for help.
The bus ride home was always quick, and from there the walk to my apartment was barely five minutes long. My friends
and I talked amongst ourselves, complaining about how someone's dad was making them re-take the SATs or how expensive the tuition was for another's dream school. When I bid them a goodbye I climbed the three flights up to my residence, finding my mom sitting on the tan couch of our neat living room. She was crying, head in her hands. I had only seen my mom in this position a few times previously and each time had something to do with one of her five children. I felt my stomach twist into a thick knot and I immediately knew something was horribly wrong.

“Your sister was arrested.”

It was rare that I found myself at a loss for words nowadays, but this was one of the moments where I felt physically incapable of responding to the syllables that had fallen from her mouth. All my life Jen had been like a second mom to me. She was essentially my second caretaker as a child and had eventually become both my sister and best friend throughout my teenage years. The difficulty of the situation didn’t come from the thought of her sitting in a prison cell, but rather that someone I had always looked up to, someone that I considered to be one of the best people in my life, had fucked up. Sure, it was possible that I glamorized both Jen’s role in my life and as a human being, but being forced to come to terms with the concept of her doing something lawfully wrong was something I was never prepared to do.

Slowly my mom began to explain the details of the situation to the best of her anxiety-ridden abilities. She told me that she had been arrested for a nonviolent crime and that we would try to get her out on bail, but it was unlikely. From what I was able to understand in my nervous and shaky state, Jen had been arrested for multiple accounts of scamming online companies from years ago.

I couldn’t imagine the hurt she was experiencing as a mother. Her face was stained with tears; the mascara she’d worn earlier in the day discoloring her normally pale features. I took notice of her shaking hands as she clutched her cell phone, possibly hoping that someone would call at any moment saying that my sister had been released. My family and I were equally as clueless as to how this process worked.

It was one of those moments where I could physically feel my heart drop although that was medically impossible. I was positive that I would never forget the sentiment of my stomach sinking or my entire being feeling completely and utterly numb. I felt dizzy and even though I knew I wasn’t going to faint, I was probably near that point. Simultaneously, I had a
million thoughts going through my mind while it also stayed totally blank - comforting words or disorganized questions seemingly unable to fall from my lips. I thought back to all the good memories I had involving Jen. The many times she'd babysat me when I was a child, when she threatened to beat up the boys that had broken my heart, and the hundreds of laughs that echoed from my mouth due to her ridiculous antics.

At the beginning of the process my immediate family kept the situation quite secretive. It was possible that they were ashamed or embarrassed of the details. As time progressed we found that the concept of a loved one going to jail was slowly being normalized. I was unsure if this was a good or bad thing – perhaps I was slowly desensitizing myself to our “new normal” of a family, but we had never been quote-on-quote ordinary anyway. Maybe it was because the media had found this interest in the what used to be taboo subject.

I didn't dare tell any of my friends. While my family and I gradually adjusted to the visits, timed phone calls, and letters, it was still something I didn't think any teenager could relate to. How could any seventeen-year-old understand the feeling in the pit of your stomach when your sister sends you a birthday card from prison? Or when the correctional facility goes on lockdown and no one hears from her for four days? It's a process that I truly don't believe I could ever fully describe or anyone would ever understand unless they've also gone through it. I felt as though I could go to a thousand therapy appointments and get prescribed the strongest medication and I would never fully adjust to this new lifestyle.

“So, you're numb towards the situation,” my therapist started again, scribbling something down on the notepad that rested on her knee. I shrugged my shoulders before slowly nodding my head. Jen had been in jail for nearly a year now and my opinion was reluctant to change. I was never one to feel sorry for myself or throw a pity party, but admittedly so, there wasn’t a handbook on how to deal with your sister going to prison.

My tired eyes dashed back over to the analog clock on her desk. Yet again I felt as though those neon red numbers were provoking me - spiting me as a reminder that my appointment was far from over.

“I miss her,” I started softly. The small woman sitting across from me immediately leaned forward, most likely shocked that I was finally in the beginning stages of actually opening up. “But I don’t think this situation is about me. I know it’s important to deal with it, but my problems are the very
least of my family’s issues here. My sister’s in jail.”

And in that moment, that was surely what I felt. I felt overly selfish for sitting in some therapist’s office, where my parents were paying for her psychological assistance by the minute when there were much more important problems at hand. I didn’t mean to intentionally invalidate my emotions or possible mental problems.

She listened to what I was saying for a few moments and I immediately felt stupid for letting the words leave the comfort of my brain, where no one would ever hear them. I was sure that she was going to tell me I was crazy or something, possibly diagnose me with some outlandish mental disorder simply based on my self-deprecation.

“Your sister’s incarceration is something that you need to deal with,” her words hit me like a ton of bricks as if they were roughly hitting my skin as a need for a wake-up call. “You’re right, the situation isn’t about you. But it’s still a part of your life and you can’t just sit around acting like it isn’t weighing you down.”
Brain
Danielle Benincasa
Smoking Pot
Joe Sigurdson

As we emerge from the brush, now high,
I can hear the drying stream
at the bottom of the glen.

Far down the path, the greenery mushes into a Monet.

Sparrows collect on the trees, on the dust, and chitter and dance.

One of us says: Let’s go bathe in the creek.
I’m so in love with it, I’ll leave my watch on.
The first time I saw her, I felt a spark jump into my body.

I decided that day I had to get to know her, so I did. We became friends on the spot. The spark grew stronger and bolder the longer we were together.

When we laughed, the spark traveled to my lungs. It forced air out in small chuckles more frequently than when I was with anyone else.

When she walked into the room, the spark would travel to my knees. The electricity made them tremble violently and only intensified with each day.

When I asked her out, the electricity found my hands and heart. The thriving current sent my heart into overdrive and warmed my hands to the point of sweating.

When I saw her expression change to pity, the electricity pulled away from my body.

With her sad eyes on me, she said, “Yes, if you mean as friends... sorry.”

Lightning raged to my head and seemed to take shelter there, playing with it.

I said it was all right and walked away, not being able to focus on anything but the raging current.

After, the bolt didn’t stop growing. Every time she comes near, it becomes stronger. The lightning shares its time between my head and my heart. Growing too big and too harmful, it rips me apart.

I hope and wait for an outlet for the energy that has nowhere to go. A lightning rod. Someone to come along and take this burden from me.
Heart
Danielle Benincasa
Weed, Pizza Rolls, and a Breakup
Joe Sigurdson

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

DALTON (25. He’s a drug dealer and a bit quirky. He’s in pajamas.) is sitting on his couch. TYLER (25. He’s a down to earth kind of guy. He’s a bit of hipster.) enters the apartment.

DALTON
Yooo, T-Dog, what’s crackin’ my man?

TYLER
Hey, Dalton.

DALTON
Have a seat. Observe my vast plethora of fine mary jane.

TYLER
Well, I uh.

DALTON
What is it, man? What’s wrong? Did that crazy old lady next door stare at you as you walked by? She does that to me, too. It scares the heck out of me.

TYLER
No, no that’s not it.

DALTON
Then what’s up, man?
TYLER
You see, I didn’t come here to buy any weed.

DALTON
Oh, did you just want to hang? I could make some pizza rolls.

TYLER
I can’t buy weed off you anymore, I’m sorry.

DALTON
You’re quitting? But what about your anxiety? Hey, if you’re feeling better that just means the medicine is working.

TYLER
No, I’m not quitting.

DALTON
Oh. You’re not... You’re not going to somebody else are you?

TYLER
Look, Dalton, you’ve been a good drug dealer to me, but I have to move on.

DALTON
Who is it?

TYLER
Why does that matter?
DALTON
Because it does, man. Who? It better not be Kyle.

TYLER
(sighs)
Yeah, it’s Kyle.

DALTON
Are you friggin’ kidding me?

TYLER
I’m sorry, he just has really good bud.

DALTON
Oh, so you have bought off him before? I knew something was suspicious when you didn’t pick up for like two weeks.

TYLER
I told you, I went camping.

DALTON
Did you?

TYLER
Well, no.

DALTON
Gosh darn it. What’s so special about his weed anyway?

TYLER
Dude, I don’t know. It just gets you super fucking stoned.
DALTON
Hey, you know there’s no swearing in this house. And dude, I’ve got this new strain. It’s called arctic bubble gum.

TYLER
You have a new weed every time I come here and each one gets me just as high. I’m done falling for it.

DALTON
I swear it’s different this time.

TYLER
Dalton, I’m sorry, I’ve made up my mind.

DALTON
There’s something more to this, isn’t there?

TYLER
(sighs)
To be perfectly honest yeah, there is.

DALTON
Well, what then?

TYLER
You’re kind of weird. I often get kind of uncomfortable being here.

DALTON
How so?
TYLER
Just little things. Like how you call me T-Dog, or how you offer me pizza rolls literally every single time I come here even though I always say no. And especially the no swearing thing. What kind of drug dealer has a strict no swearing rule?

DALTON
I thought you liked being called T-Dog?

TYLER
No, it’s weird.

DALTON
I can change.

TYLER
I’m sorry, Dalton.

Tyler leaves.

DALTON
Please, don’t go. At least let me make some pizza rolls.
Namaste
Victoria de la Concha

A girl with
faded black Chinese
characters printed above
her butt
tells me that means

my soul recognizes yours.

Twenty-one years of searching,
but she found it!

In an aisle
at Whole Foods,
haphazardly thrown next to
the organic extra virgin olive oil.

(hah)

That’s deep.
Namaste.

I too,
can speak out of my ass.
Untitled
Fergie Baliclic
A simple poem about grapes
Victoria de la Concha

You could peel off my skin
as easily as a grape’s
and pin the transparent
pieces out to dry on the
clothesline.

Me
staring at you
with my squishing insides
exposed
would be the first time
in months I was honest

about this infection inside
of me that’s been withering
away at the entire vine.
The crows won’t even peck
at the crop now

yet here you stand
insisting
you can make wine
out of rotten grapes,

but how can you ignore
my bitter taste when you raise
the chalice to your lips?

How can you ignore
the stains I leave on your smile,
the color of healing bruises?

How can you get drunk
off of the poison
we’ve fermented in these musty
cellars we call hearts?
INT. SPRINGTINKLE MEDICAL OFFICE - DAY

DR. KEYRAN (52) paces the floor. Dressed in a medical coat, glasses and a button up. He undoes the top button and loosens his tie. His jumbled hair flops around as he whips around to look at the clock.

DR. KEYRAN
Come on, you got this. You are in complete control. I just need to stand up for myself-

BEATRICE (45) walks in. A middle aged woman with her hair tucked behind her ears. Her flat shoes muffle her steps as she approaches.

BEATRICE
Dr. Keyran?

Dr. Keyran turns to face her, his glasses almost falling off. He catches them and places them back on his face.

DR. KEYRAN
Oh god! Beatrice! What brings you here?

BEATRICE
I-

DR. KEYRAN
Was it because you ached to see me again?
BEATRICE
Well kind of. My family thinks I’m doing better seeing you.

Dr. Keyran stares off into the distance and walks about the room as he speaks. He lands face to face with her.

DR. KEYRAN
You just couldn’t get me off your mind. So you broke through these doors to see me at this hour!

BEATRICE
2 in the afternoon?

DR. KEYRAN
Well you were so unexpected!

Beatrice motions to the receptionist’s desk located where she came from.

BEATRICE
I have an appointment.

DR. KEYRAN
Oh. Well before we start I need to get something off my chest.

Dr. Keyran moves and lays down on the patient’s chair and looks up at Beatrice.

BEATRICE
Why are you sitting in the patient chair- I’ll just stand.

DR. KEYRAN
I’ll just come out and say it. I can’t do this anymore.
BEATRICE
Do what anymore?

DR. KEYRAN
This!

BEATRICE
Being my therapist?

DR. KEYRAN
I just can’t anymore, Beatrice!

Beatrice chuckles in disbelief.

BEATRICE
I thought we were doing so good! I really began making progress!

Dr. Keyran points at Beatrice. He emphasizes the point every time he says you.

DR. KEYRAN
That’s the issue right there! You! You! You! That’s all you care about here.

BEATRICE
Should it not be?

DR. KEYRAN
You never ask me how my day was! All I ever do is listen, how about you listen for a change?

BEATRICE
I’m not going to pay you to have me listen to you.
DR. KEYRAN
Well then I don’t want to get paid by you to not have me have you listen to me talk about how you have to listen to me. Are you listening?

BEATRICE
You can’t be serious. I refuse to spend my time here hearing this.

Dr. Keyran gets up.

DR. KEYRAN
So you’re just not going to listen, Beatrice? Wouldn’t be the first time.

BEATRICE
Just because you don’t understand what your job calls for, you want to break this off?

DR. KEYRAN
It’s not the only thing I’ve noticed. I feel like you’re ashamed of me. I haven’t even met your parents yet and we’re reaching our monthiversary.

BEATRICE
I don’t introduce my parents to my therapists!

DR. KEYRAN
Is that what you tell all the others!? You must be seeing someone else!

BEATRICE
Now you’ve gone mad.
DR. KEYRAN
Then how come you never spend time with me?

BEATRICE
You charge by the hour!

Dr. Keyran folds his hands and places them on his chest.

DR. KEYRAN
And how does that make you feel? Tell me more!

BEATRICE
Now you’re just being difficult.

DR. KEYRAN
Like your ex husband?

Beatrice’s mouth drops.

BEATRICE
Low blow doc, low blow.

DR. KEYRAN
Look it’s not you, it’s me... not being able to handle you.

Dr. Keyran glances over the clock.

DR. KEYRAN (CONT’D)
Oh! Just look at the time, you must be going now!

He puts his hand on her back and moves her towards the door.

BEATRICE
But I just got here.
DR. KEYRAN
Beatrice, look, I double booked appointments so you should just go before things get awkward.

BEATRICE
What do you mean?

DR. KEYRAN
My next client! He's your-

FOOTSTEPS are heard from the exit and they come to a stop. Beatrice looks at the exit in horror.

BEATRICE
-My ex husband!
To See
Alisha Renner
When fall came around, every year my brother Andrew and I would rake the leaves of orange and crimson and yellow into piles twice the size of ourselves, run down our driveway and leap into them as many times as we possibly could. We’d spend all day doing this, or collecting rocks in the stream behind the house, or tracking birds and squirrels through the woods to find where they lived. At dinner, Mom would call us in for a hot meal, and our cold red faces and lopsided grins with leaves stuck to every corner of our bodies would make her laugh. Fall was my favorite time of year.

But now it had lost all its luster. All I saw now was the dead and decaying, the colors that once spoke of hopes and happiness now only reminded me of pain and sadness. I realized this as I sat in my wheelchair on the back porch of our home. Andrew sat next to me, a folding chair ragged with use his only support. He had a beer in his hand, slowly taking sips from it as we watched the sun fall down beneath the falling leaves of the forest we once enjoyed so much. But neither of us could enjoy it much longer, for altogether not so different a reason. We were leaving the place we once called home. How we were doing it, however, may be considered a little different.

I spoke up after a few minutes of silence. “So you finally got your assignment, huh? You enjoyed basic, right? You’ll probably enjoy shipping out when you leave tomorrow.”

He snorted a little into his beer bottle, the Sam Adams Lager he loved so much. “No one loves basic. You may like it, but anyone who loved it is psychotic and needs to be removed from the Marine Corps.” He thought about what he said for a moment. “Actually, that’s exactly what Marines are. Psychotic.”

“I always knew you were. Mom just never believed me and refused to have you tested.”

“I’m sure she wanted too. But now I’m twenty-two and there’s nothing she can do about it.”

“Doesn’t help that you’re being deployed to Afghanistan. Have you told Mom yet?”

Andrew let out a sigh, lowering his bottle. “No, I haven’t. She knows when, just not where. I don’t want her to worry.”

I raised my eyebrow at him. “That will just make her worry more.”

“True. But I think she’s worried more about you at the moment. Your surgery is in two months, Connor.”
I looked to the sky, avoiding eye contact with him. I knew damn well what he was talking about, but this was the one thing I didn’t want to bring up in this conversation. Some birds flew by, and I focused on them while remaining silent.

“We are talking about this,” he stated in a voice I knew too well, his I mean business voice. “You’re only nineteen, for god’s sake. This could help. She scheduled it, and I don’t want you to give her a hard time about it. She’s only trying to help you.”

Silence was the answer he got, but he used the opportunity to keep talking.

“This surgery would make things better. If you back out, it will crush her. It would crush all of us.”

Still silence. I continued to watch the birds until they fell below the cover of the forest.

“Connor, this surgery has a chance, it may be able to....” He trailed off, but I knew full well what he was going to say. Because of that, I became angry.

“Because it may save my life?! It may stop me from dying the slow painful death that I’m already going through?! You were there when we talked to the doctor, Andrew. He said twenty percent. That’s the chances of it working. With a forty percent chance that it’ll speed up! So instead of having eight months to live, I could go down to three! How the hell is that a choice I can make!?”

He was quiet, and sipped his beer while looking at the floorboards of the porch. Tears had begun to stream down my face, and I was shaking so hard my wheelchair rattled. When he looked back up at me, I saw he had tears in his eyes.

“I just don’t want to lose my baby brother.”

The words hit me like a boulder. My brother, the Marine, the one I looked up to, who wasn’t scared of anyone but his mother, didn’t want to lose me. He was crying. I had never seen him cry. It scared me.

“Andrew...”

He interrupted. “No, Connor, it’s OK. I knew you didn’t want to talk about it. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both thinking thoughts that hurt us to our core. The chances that my brother would see me again...well, non-existent is a good phrase. Finally, I spoke up.

“I don’t know if I’ll do the surgery, Andrew. It’s a decision that I can’t make in a few days. Hell, I couldn’t make this decision in a few years. But I have to. Chances are pretty good that I’m going to die. Doing this surgery would mean admitting
that I’m panicking, willing to make my chances worse for the slightest chance it may become better. It’s like picking from three hats, knowing that beneath two of them is certain death.”
   “I know.” He whispered. “I can’t make you do it. But I want to see my brother be healthy again. At least promise me you’ll think about it.”
   “I will, I promise.”
   “Good. I love you Connor.” The first time he had ever said that to me.
   “I love you too Andrew.” There was no hesitation in my voice.
   He nodded and reached beneath his chair. “We both have a long journey ahead of us. Different directions, but hopefully we will see each other again.” He popped the cap off a second bottle of Sam Adams and handed it to me.
   “What’s this for?” I asked.
   “One for the road, brother.” He responded, and we both drank and watched the moon rise in the distance.

***

One year later and the fall was the same as the last. Orange and crimson and yellow leaves filled the trees and littered the ground. Birds and squirrels scampered in the forest. The creek gurgled of the rocks left on it banks.
   The funeral was short. He wanted it that way. People came up and said good things about him. He was courageous, to face it. He wasn’t sure if the choice he made was the right one, but he made it anyway. The pain he felt was now gone, and he was in a better place.
   It didn’t change the fact I had lost my brother.
   I stayed long after everyone had left, sitting as the sun set, next to my brother’s grave.
   “I thought you had a chance bro. More than I did.” I spoke to the wind. “Well, you were right. The surgery had a low chance of success. But it was able to keep me alive.”
   I sat longer, as the moon rose in the night sky. Silence all around.
   “Did you give yourself up for me, Andrew? You took a bullet saving another man over in that sandbox, but in exchange for your life, fate gave me mine back. What if I didn’t want it?”
   It was getting colder, and as the sun dipped ever lower the pain in my heart only grew. The moon began its ascent into the sky filled with darkness, only a few bright stars breaking up
the emptiness. Or was that just how my heart felt?
    “You never did give me a choice in anything growing up. I suppose this was no different.”

It was nearly midnight now. I decided it was time. I reached to my side and grabbed the two bottles. Sam Adams. I popped them both open, and leaned the first against his headstone. I took a sip of mine, and the wind seemed to pick up a little. I could almost hear Andrew’s voice in my head.
    “What’s this for?”

I watched the moon rise in the same sky we looked at together last time I saw him. I knew what it was for.
    “One for the road, brother.”
The doctor seems to think
I have something called “ALS.”
Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis.
I have no idea what that means,
but every other doctor
told me every other disease
in every other book.
I suppose we’ll see.

My wife insists something is wrong
just because my hand
won’t fully grip
my amber-brew bottle.
Well gee,
it’s almost as if
it was a gravitational casualty
of this former lineman.
I’m fine.

I’m not fine.
I can’t even make a fist.
The doctor called it
something different this time.
Lou Gehrig’s Disease.
Funny.
I always hated baseball.
With how tear-stained
my wife’s shirt was and
how much her makeup ran
on the way home,
I started to think
she did, too.

Come morning, I am helped
march to my melancholic rocker.
It has become my home.
Its green, plush cushions
are where I see night turn to day
and back again.
Its creaks and cracks
are my favorite song off of
the bestselling record.
The mahogany vessel
is where the spoon-fed
dinners taste like pity.
The way she avoids my glances
are punches of their own.
I’m told it will get better as
I’m lifted into my bed.
When my door closes and
I hear the routine whimpers,
I know that it won’t.
In other news,
the Yankees won tonight.

At least they sat me
next to a window.
Here I can see them,
my boys.
Three years apart in age,
three inches apart in height,
and three arguments away
from throwing fists.
The parrots squabble
over whose game is more fun,
who won, or who
will get to be leader.
I’ve seen this rerun enough
to know exactly
what I would do
with these two
if I could do
anything at all.
Their bird brains won’t
remember me before
I won the lottery
with this three-letter disorder.
There was a homerun in
the bottom of the ninth
Yankees won.

I am a man no more than
this beer solves my problems.
It is my chemical crutch
for my inebriated legs.
Its malty language is nothing new
to my tongue, but now
when I take a sip, I savor
the fermented, blurry flavor.
It helps to forget
that nobody understands.
This isn’t a cold
nor is it common.
This is a death sentence.
Quick and painless on the body.
It doesn’t feel a thing.
Cruel and unusual on the mind.
It doesn’t feel a thing.
Their hopes and prayers
are pleas to a pauper
since it was Him who
let this happen.
5–2.
A bit careless this time, but
the Yankees still won.

My boys will become men
despite me sitting right here.
My wife is a widow
despite me sitting right here.
They all talk about me
despite me sitting right here.
7–6 Yankees.
Almost went into extra innings.

I have become
a cheap catcher’s mitt.
beaten,
tattered,
and
unable to fulfill
its only purpose
of holding
a ball,
after only 41 years.
The one thing
I have left
is
this weathered
leather
husk

that's struggling
just
to be.

Looks like
it's

over.

The Yankees finally lost.
Perfect
Nicole Willoughby

She is looking at me. I can’t help but look back. Her eyes glossy and red, just woken; her hair is matted on one side, tangled on the other. She stares at me. The lights are off.

We look over to the side of our desks. Our roommates have left. We look back at each other and hold. We look down, turn on the switch, the fluorescent light flickers, the blue overcomes the black in her eyes. Surrounded with red remnants.

I grab my contacts for the day. We place one in my left and her right, then my right and her left. A single tear falls from the right corner of her eye. My left eye stings, a small side effect. Yet another falls, but from her left, she lets it fall, leaving a trace on her imperfect skin. I don’t feel it. I wouldn’t have noticed it, but I would know it’s there, making its dependable arrival.

It trails down her jawbone, down her neck, never touching the ground.

I glance around the imperfections on her face. The scars, the discoloration, the flaws, all so present, so obvious. I brush out the simple knots and clumps and allow my hair to fall flat against me. I put moisturizer on my face, she does the same, our fingers tracing the exact pattern, covering the area entirely, and massaging the cooling cream on my hot skin. We stare at each other. I release a sigh and she does the same.

I look down, so many unnecessary products. I continue the same routine as I have done every day.

I have been so used to staring at her multiple times a day. Is she my friend? There are days she will smile, match her lips to the music she occasionally plays and lets loose. It’s beautiful. She looks free. Today she is trapped.

There is nothing I can do.

We grab our makeup, liquid mousses, and paint ourselves. I watch her as she watches me. We take care of each other, making sure neither of us misses a spot, leaving an even layer. We scan each other; she needs more under her eyes. More. More. We grab our cover-up, and dab and smooth the fluid around our flaws. She is now one tone. Better.

We grab our powder makeup - to lessen the shine. A light coat is brushed around our faces. The brush tickles the crevices around my nose, but I don’t let it bother me. Nor does she let it.
We grab our blush and brush that as well, but only around the cheeks, forehead, and a tinge on our noses. Now we have the correct amount of smoothness and color.

I look at her. I look at the part I can’t fix, only something that time will heal or hide. The red is gone, yet the blue shines as bright as the sea. I feel as if I make it worse being here. I wish I could leave and give her space. I know what I am. A constant reminder of what I’m not. A reminder of what is going on. A reminder of what will not go away. But also a reminder of whom she is. A reminder of what she has grown up to be, that there is more than just a shell – a mask.

I look into her eyes, as she does with mine. Another tear follows the same path as the last. I force myself to smile, one appears on her. We wipe the traces away and once again smooth out the numerous layers we placed on ourselves. Perfect.
Bliss
William Ramirez
INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

In a room devoid of anything but a chair and a table, THE GIRL (21) sits. She shuffles a tarot card deck.

In one quick motion she glides the deck across the table.

She picks one card from the line of face down cards. The Girl places this card on the table, face up and separate. It is the card of The Fool.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Fool

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

The Girl is naked in bed next to THE GUY (22). He sleeps with his mouth open and she finger combs her hair. After a quick puff of air into her cupped palm, she lowers her body down to kiss his cheek.

The Guy makes a faint moan.

THE GIRL

(whispers)
Good morning.

His eyelids flutter open and focus on The Girl.

THE GUY
I think you’re the one...

She grins at the news.

THE GUY (CONT’D)
...that’s always gonna make me rock hard.
The Girl’s smile immediately falls. The Guy pulls her in against his body. He closes his eyes and smiles as she stares blankly at the wall.

INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl picks another card from the line of cards. She places it face up next to The Fool. This is the card of The Hierophant.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Hierophant

INT. CHURCH - MORNING

The Girl places two dollars into a wooden box on a table with rows of candles. The candles are held by glass jars with images of saints, angels, and the Mother Mary on them.

The Girl strikes a match, lights a candle, and kneels on the pew beside them. She lowers her head and claps her hands. Her eyelids are shut but her eyelids twitch, alive with thought.

The Girl strikes another match.

INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl pulls The High Priestess from the deck.

SUPERIMPOSE: The High Priestess

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

The Girl holds a match up to the tip of a joint. The joint lights and she inhales while shaking out the match.

The Girl exhales a puff of smoke. She fans away the cloud with her free hand and hums a happy tune.

The Girl hums to another drag but this time when she exhales, words come out too. She sings and dances with confidence, alone in her kitchen wearing only a tee shirt and underwear.
INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl pulls The Queen of Cups card from the deck.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Queen of Cups

INT. HOUSE PARTY - NIGHT

The Girl raises a red solo cup up within a circle of friends who follow suit. They clink plastic rims together and bring the cups to their lips to drink.

Several friends from the circle disperse after the toast and through the gap left in the broken circle The Girl notices THE LOVER (20) across the room.

The Lover is a pretty girl with alluring eyes that stare back at The Girl. She smirks and gives a small wave. The Girl swallows hard and tucks a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl pulls The Lovers from the deck.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Lovers

INT. HOUSE PARTY - NIGHT

The Girl laughs hard with The Lover in their not-so-secret corner. They catch their breath slowly and in the following silence the two girls notice how close they are.

They lock eyes and lean into a kiss.

A man’s hand grabs onto The Girl's arm and yanks her away.

INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl pulls The Queen of Swords from the deck.

SUPERIMPOSE: The Queen of Swords
INT. HOUSE PARTY - NIGHT

The Guy squeezes hard onto The Girl’s arm as he drags her away from the Lover. The Girl struggles to escape his grasp.

The Guy pins her against a wall and shakes her. Everyone in the room stares but no one intervenes.

The Girl snaps -- she head butts his nose and he stumbles back and crashes into a beer pong table. He holds his gushing nose as he stares at her from the floor.

The Girl flips him off. The Lover rushes over to The Girl. The Girl takes the Lover’s hand and leaves the party.

INT. BLANK ROOM - DAY

The Girl slides the face down line of cards together. She follows suit and slides the six face up cards together and places them back into the deck.

With a satisfying TAP, The Girl evens out the deck on the table.

FADE TO BLACK
you had a bible, I think. tucked
against the far corner of your little
dining table. fit us just fine, me

and my brother, but you
kept to the kitchen and ate standing
up, and you’d make a table out

of your big-ass hand. could have
fit us all better without the bible
I think. but you didn’t want

to move it. it sat there, rotting
in the lamplight, propping
up your pistol, a stand for

the salt and the pepper and
the tobasco that only you
used because you know we

don’t like hot, but you’d put it
in our grits anyway, say it’ll
toughen us up, blacken our

skin, and we better not cry near
the bible lest we wanna go
to hell, and we’d think hell

couldn’t be any hotter than
that tobasco, cutting our
tongues open, the cracks

in the leather of your bible’s
rotting front cover,
but we wouldn’t

say it. we wouldn’t say it.
Going
William Ramirez
FADE IN:

INT. JASON’S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The bedroom is dark. In the room is a bed, a closet, a television across from the bed, and a nightstand table next to the bed.

On the nightstand table is a phone and a wedding ring. A man’s and woman’s clothes lie intermingled on the floor next to a pile of movies.

In the bed are JASON (22), a sneaky college student majoring in Cinema and Screen Studies, and CANDACE (22), Jason’s overdramatic wife of the same major, asleep in the bed.

The phone on the table rings and lights up, illuminating the room. Jason rolls over and peers at the phone. Candace grumbles in her sleep.

Jason looks at the phone and his eyes widen. He puts the phone to his ear and sneaks out of the bed.

JASON

(whispers)

Hey, Penelope, gimme a second.

He walks out of the bedroom and...

EXT. JASON’S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jason stands on the porch and looks out at the night sky above.

JASON

Sorry about that. What’s up?
INT. PENELLOPE’S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

The bedroom’s light is on. A closet stands against the wall, and a nightstand beside a colorful bed.

On the bed is PENELLOPE (22), a guilty college student majoring in Creative Writing.

She holds the phone to her ear. Tears stream down her face.

PENELLOPE

(sniffles)
I...I...

INTERCUT telephone conversation.

JASON
Penelope, it’s three-forty a.m. What do you want?

PENELLOPE
(cries)
I-I’m...

JASON
Pen, are you okay?

PENELLOPE
(cries)
I called because I needed to talk to you.

JASON
About what?

PENELLOPE
We can’t keep on doing this Jason.
(MORE)
We just can’t. Not tonight. Not next week. Never!

Jason walks around the porch and rolls his eyes. Candace stands at the door, but Jason does not see her. She glares at him.

JASON
Oh, you didn’t say that last week.

PENELOPE
You’re with Candace, Jason! I just... she’s my friend.

JASON
(yells)
You don’t think I know that?

PENELOPE
Don’t yell at me, Jason! I called to end this. Don’t get angry at me because you’re cheating on Candace!

JASON
You’re cheating on her as much as I am! Cheating is a two-person job!

PENELOPE
And I no longer want to be a part of it! Jason, I’m sorry, just... Never call me again.

JASON
Penelope. Penelope, don’t you hang up on me-
INT. PENELOPE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Penelope takes her phone away from her ear and ends the call. She throws her phone onto the bed and wipes the tears from her face.

EXT. JASON'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jason holds the phone to his ear and clenches his jaw.

JASON

Penelope?... Penelope!

He takes the phone away from his ear and looks at it.

JASON (CONT’D)

Fuck.

He turns around and sees Candace. He jumps back, afraid.

CANDACE

So, you've been cheating on me?

JASON

Let's not do this, Candace. It's just going to end with you kicking me out once again for no reason.

CANDACE

What do you mean let's not do this? This is the third time you've cheated on me in a month! First with Holly, then Fred, and now...

She walks towards him and reveals that she's holding a knife. Jason slowly backs away, his hands up in defense.

CANDACE (CONT’D)

I should kick you out for good this time!
JASON
Candace... Candace, you’re being a little... No, you know what, I didn’t do anything wrong! This is absurd!

Candace shakes her head and waves the knife in protest.

CANDACE
Don’t lie to me.

JASON
You can’t be serious, Candace-

CANDACE
-And you did it with Penelope? My best friend, huh? Her. Not me. Her. Do you think she’s better than me or something? Just like Holly and Fred were somehow both better than me!

JASON
Candace-

He reaches the end of the porch and almost falls off. Candace catches him and holds him steady. She puts the tip of the knife to his chest.

CANDACE
You’ll fall on my terms... Now, tell me what you did, Jason. I want to hear it straight from your mouth.

JASON
Candace, you’re crazy. I didn’t do anything wrong.
CANDACE
Jason, don't lie to me. Just tell me what you did, and maybe I won't hurt you.

JASON
Candace.

CANDACE
Jason.

JASON
Fine... I watched The Walking Dead without you. There. Ya happy?

CANDACE
What was that? I couldn't hear you. Just repeat that once more for me.

JASON
I said... I watched Walking Dead without you.

CANDACE
That’s right. That’s right.

She pulls the knife back then pushes him off of the porch. He falls to the ground with an OOF.

CANDACE (CONT’D)
YOU TOLD ME THAT YOU HAD WORK!

JASON
You were studying for midterms, Candace! You said you were too busy to watch it!
Jason gets up from the ground. Candace jumps off of the porch and stands in front of him.

CANDACE
That doesn’t mean you have to go to Penelope’s to watch it!

JASON
Actually... She came here.

CANDACE
Here?

JASON
Yeah...

CANDACE
You let her come here?... Oh, God, don’t tell me you watched it in our bed!

JASON
We-

CANDACE
-You did didn’t you? That’s our spot! How could you?

JASON
Candace, calm down. It’s just a TV show. We don’t need to do this every time I watch something without you. Like I’ve told you so many times before, we can watch reruns or just go to Netflix or-
CANDACE
-I don’t give a fuck about that, Jason! I wanted to watch it with you, yet now I hear you’re watching our favorite show with my best friend instead of me!

JASON
Candace. It’s only a-

CANDACE
-How many times have you done this with her?

Beat.

JASON
Three.

She lifts the knife again.

JASON (CONT’D)
Oh, come on! You’re always busy!

CANDACE
You told me you were going to wait! What else did you watch with her? Huh? Fuller House? Legion?

JASON
Put the knife down! This isn’t necessary! I love you Candace!

CANDACE
Oh, fuck you and your love! I just can’t believe you’d...

She throws the knife onto the ground.
CANDACE (CONT’D)
Get out.

JASON

CANDACE
Get out, Jason. Get the fuck out. I don’t want to see you, smell you, hear you, anything. I’m tired of this.

JASON
Candace, we still have Game of Thrones when it comes back on... And we can watch Stranger Things in the Fall. Candace, it’s not that-

CANDACE
-Get your things and get out.

JASON
Candace, I pay half of the bills-

CANDACE
-GET OUT!

Jason scampers into the house. Candace fumes and walks back and forth across the lawn. She looks back at the house.

CANDACE (CONT’D)
And tell Penelope never to talk to me again!

Her head falls into her hands and she sobs as Jason runs out of the house, a suitcase in his hands.
JASON
Candace, I’ll call you later. Maybe we can properly talk about this like a-

CANDACE
-GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!

Jason runs down the street away from her. Candace watches him run for a second. Her eyes then widen.

CANDACE (CONT’D)
Wait! Jason! Jason!

He turns and looks at her.

JASON
What?

CANDACE
Wanna watch Bob’s Burgers on Hulu tomorrow? They recently released new episodes and I’m done with my exams.

Jason smiles.

JASON
Definitely. See you tomorrow! If you need me, I’ll be at Fred’s!

He turns and runs on. Candace smiles and walks back inside, closing the door behind her.

FADE TO BLACK.
The crimson rose petal delicately landed on an irritated tongue. She abruptly opened her bloodshot eyes to see the hot coals spark into flames. Her once pale skin flushed to life as she began to taste blood, from where the ruby wine once touched every corner of her mouth, like an uncontrollable rash. Her hair, bright as a fresh crimson sunburn, coiled around the apple that she once bit into, rolled away from her hand. She stood up, lit the end of a cigarette, and took out the silk crimson ribbon from her burning hair. She once was a pale snow white. Now all she sees is red.
Left Behind

Alisha Renner
A Bronx Bird’s Song
Alex Franceschi

The Bronx. It’s whatever. It’s not my place of origin, but it’s all I know. At times I love living in the Bronx and at times I can’t bear it. It’s not a place that sees much change. There are new stores and new people, but the essence and going-ons never change. You’ve got your weed over here, your crack over there. Coke and pills, they’re around if that’s your thing. You’ve got your Jesus freaks telling you you’re going to hell if you don’t change your ways, but hey, we’ll see. You’ve got your stuck up kids doing the only thing they know how to. The Bronx is anything but boring.

There are the trains, several metal carts full of sketchy people doing sketchy things. Everyone’s a character. You’ve got that drunk old guy who says us young cats don’t have no soul. What’s his opinion mean to me anyway? You’ve got a family that’s a little too big for your liking. The kids are screaming; everybody stares at the parents. Such bad parents, aren’t they? You’ve got the performers. To some, they’re admirable. To others, they’re a “menace.” Art’s subjective, right?

The Bronx comes with some risk. Don’t get me wrong, it isn’t as bad as it was back in the day. The problem is that it isn’t exactly the safest place. It is no Disney World. At least not for everyone. You’ve got your hammers and your nails. In the Bronx, it isn’t recommended you be a nail. You can tell who’s who by the way people walk. There are the people who practically speed-walk from point A to point B. These people tend to be nails. Walking quickly to the “natives” shows insecurity and weakness. Those who walk comfortably and leisurely walk that way for a reason.

In my neighborhood we’ve got Freeway. Freeway is sort of our mascot. He’s a crack-head that does odd jobs for very little money. He’ll take your trash out for 75 cents. He’ll take your dog for a walk for a dollar. He’ll clean windows, sweep, shovel; he’ll do anything really. Nobody knows Freeway’s real name, where he lives or anything about him. He’s just Freeway. Rumor has it that Freeway really isn’t a bum, owns land somewhere down south and chooses to live like that. That’s cool, I guess.

Another staple in my neighborhood is an interesting character called Speedy. This man is a true gem; there isn’t anything he can’t sell. He could sell evil to the devil. He sells different merchandise throughout the year. Around the spring
and summer, he takes a shopping cart and puts a big metal pot inside it. He makes a small fire under the cart and puts crab legs into the pot to boil. Everyone knows when they’re done because Speedy goes on to push the cart around the neighborhood yelling CRAB LEGSSS! You could hear him shouting from two blocks over. It may sound odd, but he’s completely sanitary about the whole process. On summer nights he sells all of the neighborhood kids glow sticks, candy, and other shit that kids like. In the winter he sells cheap scarves and hats. He knows how to hustle.

Then there’s the guy with the slicked back pony tail that holds the door open for people at McDonald’s. He says you don’t have to give him money, just get him something off the dollar menu. And the best part is that he treats it just like a job. One time I was standing behind him getting off the bus. He takes out a comb and starts fixing his hair. He does some light stretches and then pumps himself up. Today’s gonna be a good day! Yeah it is, damn straight! And then he’s out there holding the door open for the entire day, like a nine to five. It’s crazy. To be honest, I usually just ignore him and open the other door. Fuck him, I’ve got arms.

The Bronx has several things in abundance: corner stores, also known as bodegas, drugs, and ignorance. Ignorance is the most abundant. We’ve got people who preach lies, and masses eager to believe them. So it goes.

Bodegas are interesting in that no two are the same. They all have their own sort of flavor. Some bodegas are like small supermarkets and others are more on the sheisty side. Some of these sketchier bodegas are popular places for drugs dealers to deal said drugs. They post up right in front, usually with their clique and do what they do. They hustle. Some fit the stereotypical drug dealer look and others you’d never expect. It is what it is. Some sell their drugs from inside the bodega if the owner is cool and they break him off.

Bodegas aren’t only limited to drug dealers and their acquaintances; they’re home to all sorts of degenerates. Gambling addicts and their enablers those being loan sharks. And loan sharks never look how they do in the movies either; they’re smooth. They’re really old, Spanish dudes that dress really nice. That and they usually have a big, menacing bald guy named Julio always around them. If you get to know him Julio’s not a bad guy. Has two kids, goes to church, plays dominoes...

We’ve also got hatred. All kinds of hate, really. Hate between different neighborhoods; it’s pretty funny actually. I live on 175th street and you live two streets over on 177th, so
by that logic somebody’s gotta die. Hate between the races, specifically between Spanish and Black people. They fight because one race is colored a couple shades lighter. They fight because they have different languages, different roots. They fight because they’re ignorant. They fight for nothing. Who am I to judge though?

The people that live in the Bronx are a hardy people. You’ve got hard working, blue-collar parents and their rotten, ungrateful children. Parents that wake up much earlier than the average American to get their kids the newest Jordans. And on top of that, the kid just got an F on his report card. A kid can do no wrong in his parent’s eyes, I guess. The parents would starve to make sure the kid goes to sleep with a full stomach. If the people of the Bronx know anything, it is sacrifice.

The Bronx is a bit of an oxymoron. You’ve got people who can’t wait to leave and never come back and you’ve got people that will never leave. They tattoo their neighborhood on their skin. I don’t blame them; it’s all they’ve ever known. Their little strip of sidewalk is the entire world to them. They fight for their neighborhood. Die for their neighborhood. The Bronx has this way of creeping up on you, digging into you.

There are many things in the Bronx, but in a few years I won’t be one of them.
She Wears Her Blouses Too Loose By the Saplings
Jack Goodfellow

Little bird,
this was no accident.
She kept her hair

tied up too long.
She knew it too.

Her tough-skinned sole

pushed you from the
nest unexpectedly.

You pondered of
bliss beyond the
luxury of her wings –

and she knew it too.
It was the only cure

that she could offer.

Her blouse would
catch a branch

of the sapling behind the
house that you grew up in –
granted, it was the

one who failed her, again.
He calls sometimes,

yet she fetches the
pruning shears.
A quarter smile leaks with

the dew off each blade
while she cuts purely
but neatly through.
She always warned you of the richness in the soil when it rains.
She drew up the revolver. Her arm shook violently. She placed her hand beneath the butt of the gun to steady herself. Still, her body trembled.

He doesn’t deserve to live.

She looked down the sights and cocked the hammer. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the trigger.

~ ~ ~

My husband sat with his legs sprawled over the bedcovers, one hand pressed into the mattress behind him. White-knuckled, he bunched the sheets over his crotch in a feeble attempt to hide his nakedness.

The woman didn’t attempt to cover herself. She leaned against the headboard, wide-eyed, cheeks red as strawberry jam. Her skirt was folded up to her waist. Her breasts hung limply, the left glowing a bright white in the light of the lamp.

I approached the woman. I held my hand out and she flinched, perhaps expecting me to slap her. I wanted to. Instead, I reached down and took her hand. I held it gently between my palms.

“Get out.”

Once she was gone, I turned to the dresser. I reached inside the top drawer, shocked by the icy feel of smooth metal. With the ease of a lover, from beneath a pile of freshly laundered socks, I drew out my husband’s revolver.

~ ~ ~

Tears fell silently past her ruby lips. A soft breeze rustled her skirt and brushed her tight curls against her neck, tickling her. She surveyed the ground, which was littered with broken glass bottles. Sighing deeply, she stumbled forward to pick up the pieces.
I could tell by the way she shrugged her shoulders when I told her I was afraid of dying, that she believed in an afterlife. A lavender soap, taxless, white diamond hallway of an afterlife. She kissed both my palms in cross-like patterns, and I'll never know why she actually thinks she can forgive me
OVER BLACK, a news report:

TV ANCHOR (70s) sits in a state of awe as he struggles to begin his sentence..

**TV ANCHOR**
It has just been reported to us that the early predictions were in fact wrong, and terribly miscalculated. The President has just issued a nation wide state of emergency. The impact clock has now been set at twenty minutes from six. We at the station have chosen to stay on air for the remainder of the time...

**INT. BAR - NIGHT**

LEE (40s) unkept, detached, looks down at his watch.

INSERT SHOT: The watch reads 6:02

Lee looks around at the various faces of people all in the same state of shock.

A SCREAM echoes throughout the bar and erupts a situation of pandemonium. Lee is pushed to the ground in the chaos, he crawls to the door as people rush to exits. He gets to his feet at the door then dashes to his car in the parking lot.

**EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT**

The parking lot is littered with people attempting to make a run for it. Lee emerges through the crowd running towards his car’s spot. He slams against the side of it as he struggles to get the key into its socket.
He rips the door open but is tackled to the ground by someone trying to take his keys. He wrestles the man on the ground trying to gain the advantage. He manages to connect with a punch, Lee crawls into the driver’s side of the car as the man pulls at his leg.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Lee reaches into the glove compartment as the man continues to pull him back. He gets it open and pulls out a revolver. He spins around and pulls the trigger shooting the man in the face killing him instantly.

Lee kicks the body out of the car and slams the door shut. He throws the gun in the passenger seat and starts the car. He peels out the parking lot almost hitting a number of people. He looks at the dashboard where a clock reads....

INSERT SHOT WATCH: 6:07

He punches the wheel in anger than pushes down the accelerator as the engine growls in response. He swerves in and out between cars. Anarchy takes over the streets, overturned cars and fires are obstacles in his way.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

Lee pulls up in front of an apartment building. He gets out the car with his gun in his hand. He hustles onto the sidewalk and up the stairs to the door.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Lee sprints to the staircase as turmoil spreads in the lobby, panicked tenants run about with luggage in their hands along with pets, and prized possessions. He reaches the staircase that's cluttered with people.
A man falls over the railing a few stories higher hitting someone on his fall. Lee pushes through the crowd. He gets shoved into a corner by a passing party and almost trampled. He struggles to get to his feet when he fires a shot in the air clearing some space.

He manages to get to his desired floor where he runs down the hallway to a room in the middle of the row. At the door he goes into his pocket for his keys but they are no where to be found.

LEE

Fuck!

Lee shoots the lock of the door than kicks it in, he stumbles through the door where he makes eye contact with someone across the room.

INT. APARTMENT ROOM - NIGHT

MAGGIE (7) stands with a look of confusion on her face, Lee runs over and hugs her. He holds her and looks at his watch, the sight of the time makes him begin to cry.

LEE

We’re gonna get out of here, OK?

MAGGIE

OK.

Lee picks Maggie up and holds her in one arm, he holds the gun in the other. He exits his room.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Lee runs to the stairs, the panic hasn’t stopped and the stairs remain in dysfunction.

LEE

Hold on to me
Lee pushes his way down the stairs. A man comes from behind him and tries to violently push him out of his way. Lee turns around and pistol whips him across the face. He sends the man to the ground as he continues down the staircase. They get to the door and exit the apartment building.

EXT. ROAD - NIGHT

The car’s windshield is broken and a fire smokes inside it. Lee runs through the crowded street with no destination in mind.

Maggie begins to cry and he slows down. He comes to a stop and puts her down. He kneels to her height.

LEE
What’s wrong?

MAGGIE
I’m scared.

LEE
It’s OK, so is everyone else. So am I.

MAGGIE
Where are we going?

LEE
We’re going...

Lee can’t think of a lie to tell his daughter and struggles to look her in the eyes.
LEE (CONT’D)
I don’t know

MAGGIE
Can we just stay here?

Lee looks at his watch.

INSERT SHOT WATCH: 6:20

He looks at his daughter and tries to fake a smile.

LEE
Sure, we can stay right here.

The sky turns to black as a monumental shadow is casted upon everything. Lee looks up at the sky and pulls Maggie into his arms. People run in a hundred directions around the two who remain in the middle of the road.

FADE OUT.
Ships Rule
Brandon Smith
I wish you’d cut in front of a serial killer at a Wendy’s and he’d follow you home from work. He’d wait in your apartment, watching while you cut up carrots. Then, when a phone call distracts you, he’d sneak into the kitchen, grab the knife, and move in close to slice your throat. And then you’d die.

I wish you’d get an internship at a prestigious laboratory. You’d be able to meet your idols, all of whom inspired you to change from what you were to what you’d become. I want you to be nervous when your boss comes to check on the results of your latest failed experiment. Distraught, you’d chug what you think is tea only to discover it’s acid. And then you’d die.

I wish you’d contract a disease at a young age. It would be diagnosed early and you’d begin to evaluate your existence. I want your family to come visit. You’d all discuss any existing problems or strains to your relationships. I want you to start to fight it. You’d rally and some may call it a miracle. Then when you’d walk out of the hospital after being officially discharged, you’d get hit by a bus. And then you’d die.

All of this I wish upon you, as I walk into the classroom, see you, and think, “That’s my seat.”
The rain sounded like tiny
cymbals hitting the ground. We laid on our backs,
skin suction cupped to the linoleum. I love you.
I love the way you gesture towards
the sky with your arms, elbows locked,
when you say things like “we”. You said
you grew up with the kids who wanted
to be astronauts, but none of you
left town. Didn’t
have a rocket ship but you all
manage to still find your
way up.
The Hand Dealt
Alisha Renner
You were eighteen when the recruiters came to your high school and procured you for the army. It wasn't hard; you didn't have much of a future ahead of you and knew signing your name on a piece of paper meant a steady paycheck. Your grades were good enough, but you never had much of a plan past playing quarterback for the school's varsity team. You enlisted and stumbled through basic training. Your parents were proud, and your high school sweetheart with her eyes wet and red promised to be with you until the end.

You served for four years.

You went to Spain where you guarded an American embassy and learned language easier than you ever did in a class. Some short time later, you found yourself watching over another embassy in Germany where you spoke conversational German with a barkeeper and drank your first “real” beer. It was hoppy, dry, and bitter. A few months later, it was there that you were offered a chance to learn Dari, a Persian language spoken in Afghanistan.

In Italy, you didn’t guard anything. You lived on base at Caserma Ederle, learned Dari, and proposed to Claire. She never saw it coming, or maybe she did and played pretend. She did anything to make you smile.

You fell to one knee outside that little cafe on the edge of where the city met the base. It was a warm day, everything smelled like coffee and freshness, and the gleam in her eye as you held out your grandma’s ring to her rivaled even the sun.

You knew it was stupid to promise her the world before you left. You couldn’t give her everything she deserved. Even knowing where you were going, she said yes.

She was beside you everywhere you went from day one, and even though she couldn’t follow you anymore, you were excited when they sent you off to Afghanistan. Part of you wanted to get some real action, you were young, and it made sense to you. You were a good soldier and didn’t have the tactical mind for a leader, but you did have the language they needed. You did what you were told and you were good at it.

When your commander told you to jump, you didn't ask how high. You just knew when your feet struck the ground that it was solid and you were glad for it. The other men in your squad were as well. They didn’t know what to expect and neither did you. You called them your brothers despite never
having one of your own and it felt right. They were good soldiers and good men.

The first mission you went on together was a reconnaissance mission in a small village close to Kabul. You had announced your squad, being the only one who spoke Dari, and listened to anyone who would speak. Many of the people were terrified, but some told you what they could of their home in a dialect unfamiliar to you. It was Dari, but regional, and you struggled to keep up. Your fellow soldiers had been somewhat skittish, but never raised arms against the people of the village.

One of your brothers, Alex, the most relaxed of the squad, even walked over to some children and kicked a soccer ball around. He laughed with them, passing the ball to the next child with the side of his clunky boot. Sand flew each time he struck the ball, and you couldn’t help but be fascinated by the way the children took to him so quickly. Fun had no language. They never taught you that in high school or boot camp.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and you never complained when your boots got filled with sand. You told your brothers in arms that you didn’t care that your MREs always tasted worse than a latrine floor. You just laughed it off while the wind blew sand into your open mouths until the time came where you couldn’t laugh anymore.

You screamed out in a language that wasn’t your own. There were guns trained on you and the rest of your squad. Your brothers held their guns aloft, but yours was at your side while you called for surrender.

You ducked when the bullet whizzed past you and hit Alex square in the forehead. Blood poured from the dark wound the moment the metal slug had made contact with his flesh. He crumpled to the ground instantly, and you didn’t have time to process what had happened to him.

You raised up your gun when you saw crimson blood soak into white sand. You shot Alex’s killer.

Months later, when you were struggling with the pain in your back and the knowledge of never walking again, you could see nothing else behind your lids but the way the bullet had barreled its way into the back of your friend’s skull so easily. It had made a sickening thud and splat when it had blown through flesh and bone. The sound rang in your ears, and even when you did the grounding exercises the hospital shrink gave you, the flashbacks always felt more like real life than your fiancé’s hand in your own. Before the VA nurses gave you the IV drip that made everything go away, you would ask aloud with
morbid curiosity whether or not he felt it when it happened. You did.

Whenever you drank a cup of coffee, you remembered the morning of the day he died. Back at camp, you shared a cup of gritty military grade coffee with him. It tasted like shit and was the same color. You laughed with him over the ass water the United States Government gave you to drink. You complained then; you all did.

A week before that, you had listened to Alex talk about his mutt of a dog, Clark.

Clark was a big floppy-eared thing with a perpetually dirty coat, or so you imagined from Alex’s stories of the creature digging up his mom’s flower beds. You had laughed at those stories with him and the rest of your brothers while you sat in the cracked walls of half bombed structures, trying to stay warm in the cold desert nights.

You didn’t laugh anymore when you drank coffee. You just cried.

When the chopper took his body away, tears rolled down your cheeks and down the cheeks of all your brothers. You wondered what would happen to Clark.

Alex said once that his sister only held onto the dog for his sake, so you asked yourself whether or not a woman you had never met before would keep the dog or leave him at some shelter where he’d be put down like his owner. Something in your mind found peace in the thought that if the dog died, it would go more peacefully than its owner had.

You were honorably discharged when your convoy hit a mine and your legs stopped working. You lay in a VA hospital for a month healing.

You just thought of how the reeking stench of antiseptic and disinfectant was worse than the smell of dog shit and taste of MREs combined. You stared for hours on end at the white walls, wishing that the blast had just taken your legs clean off rather than fucking up your spine. Prosthetics didn’t scare you, but the wheelchair you were going to live in for the rest of your life did. Not that it mattered anyway, because legs or not, you knew you couldn’t run away from the horrors that hid themselves in your brain.

When you got back to the states, your girl was still there, just like she had promised. She held your hand in the hospital, blushing cheeks covered with freckles that your Ma used to call kisses from God.

She told you that everything would be alright and that you did what you had to. Her hands were soft and smooth in
your rough ones, just like the way they had been when you slid the ring onto her finger a year before. She had written you letters every chance she could, news from back home and professions of her love written in little cursive loops with perfect circle dots on the ends of sentences.

Your parents died while you were away, a presumably drunk driver took them both with one stupid decision. The driver had never been caught, and you went to the funeral with a feeling of dread. You shot a man for the first time on the day an unknown driver murdered your parents. You were told to shoot, so that was what you did, but you knew in your soul that your parents were going to the grave for some kind of screwed up karma.

Claire had told you then too, “It’s not your fault.”

Even when she had held your hand at the funeral, she had done it with a sympathetic sorrow she couldn’t seem to form into words. You knew then that things weren’t going to be the same anymore.

But then you weren’t sure, because she kissed you when she saw your dead legs. She had told you that it didn’t matter, that she still loved you.

You believed it, because when you looked into her eyes, you saw the gears spinning. You knew that she was planning out the changes she needed to make to the future she planned for you. That was four years before, and so much had changed in you both, but you didn’t know that anything had really changed, and neither did she. You only had a feeling.

Maybe the feeling didn’t become a thought because you didn’t want to think about what the war had done to you in matters beyond the physical. You just wanted to block out the blood with her kiss. You wanted her to hold you and take you home.

Home for you was an apartment in the east end of town she had rented while you were away. She had gone to college online to become a teacher while you were still abroad together.

You listened when she told you about the rambunctious preteens in her class and ended up knowing more information concerning teen idols than you had ever wanted to, but for the first month you were happy. When your mind was focused, the memories of what you had seen and done couldn’t filter into your stream of consciousness nearly as easily as they had before.

You cooked for her, even though the kitchen wasn’t made for a person in a wheelchair, to show your appreciation
for her. You didn’t let it stop you for that first month. Nothing in your apartment was made for a handicapped person, and you never complained. You just appreciated her and waited on your benefits to come in. You needed money for the wedding.

The benefits were delayed again and again. When you finally got pissed off enough to storm into the Office of Veterans Affairs you were handed a load of bureaucratic bullshit that contained a single usable piece of information. You weren’t told any of the details, merely that there was an investigation going on into one of your last missions in the Godforsaken desert.

Your nightmares came back.

Every night when you closed your eyes there were shadowy figures behind your lids. You saw flashes of light and heard the screams of those shooting guns and the cries of the people being shot. Alex’s cries.

You would wake up sweating and screaming, but she never complained. She smoothed down your damp hair and kissed every inch of your clammy torso until you could breathe again. Her lips were warm, chapped from where she bit them when you weren’t looking. Even the days when you hurt her by accident with your flailing arms, she would care for you. You knew that she loved you too greatly to worry much over the sleep she was losing from being beside you.

“It’s not your fault,” she would say.

You had never really believed her when she said it, and the illusion was dying more by the day.

You started sleeping on the lumpy green living room couch instead of in bed with her.

You told her it was easier to get into your wheelchair in the morning from the couch, but it was a blatant lie and she knew it just as well as you did.

You stopped kissing her and stopped touching her. Everyone you were close to in the field was killed or broken.

You broke people. Your hands had held a gun that had taken human lives. You knew that it wasn’t the gun that was evil, it was the man that handled it.

For a whole month you pretended that everything was okay. You remembered everything from the battle in painfully accurate detail. You saw the killing, you felt yourself following the orders of your commanders, and you felt ashamed to have ever worn a uniform.

You fought with Claire. You broke off the engagement with her and told her to go back home to her parents.
When she refused to let you end it, you left the apartment in the middle of the night and never returned. You couldn’t handle the thought of touching her with your blood covered hands.

She sent people after you for the first year, but eventually she knew chasing you wouldn’t bring you home. You knew that she still loved you and that you still loved her. You met and talked with her a few months back and explained why you left. She had at least tried to understand.

You had coffee with Claire again a week before you got her wedding invitation. The coffee smelled the same as it did in Italy, but it didn’t taste quite as good and the shine in her eyes wasn’t as bright as it was before.

It had been five years since you left her, and you didn’t cry over that. You liked her new fiancé, and you were happy that she was happy. You cried only when she reminded you that nothing was your fault.

“You know that none of it was your fault. He killed your friend.”

You sighed and carefully set down your coffee cup. You saw Alex in your head, laughing about ass water and telling you about Clark eating his mother’s petunias.

“I’m starting to see that,” you replied.

Your eyes were wet and your throat was dry. You were not fully immersed in a flashback, but since the investigation cleared you, your benefits came in and you started seeing a new shrink at the VA, remembering details was easier.

The bullet went through Alex’s head again, and you raised your gun to the face of a young boy. He couldn’t have been any older than twelve years old, eyes hardened with an intent a child his age should have never felt. When he turned to train his gun on you, you lifted yours and were faster on the trigger.

You watched a twelve-year-old boy fall to the sand, along with other boys his age who were picked off by your furious brothers in arms. They were only children.

Sometimes when you found it in you to pray, you would pray for your parent’s spirits, for Alex, for yourself, and for those boys who died in the sand. You didn’t know any of their names, but their images were burned into your brain, and you would pray that their souls found some rest.

“You did the right thing.”

The tears streamed from your eyes and left wet, hot tracks on your skin.
She reminded you of Clark sometimes. She was a maker of unintentional and well-meaning messes, and if nothing else, completely loyal even when abandoned.
In America, citizens live their life like everything in the world isn’t full of hate. They’re wrong; they don’t understand that humans have a history of stripping the love out of people like they strip them of their basic rights. Sooner or later it’ll become too much and we’ll crash.

The screeching banshee wails in grief as people crash down to earth from the heavens. They all want their life back. Sadly, everyone is too comfortable with the right to remain silent and we become flooded with hate for those who deny some the right to love. This is what we as a people do, this is what humans do. Everyone rallies behind their leaders and the human race silently screams for every person other than them to crash.

We as a people should have our voices raised with love and praise for every single person who doesn’t have a life as good as our own and yet all we ever hear on TV is hate and the cruel cheers from the people who think it’s right.

A document over one hundred years old defines our rights. The fact of the matter is that some think certain types of humans aren’t people and we despise them, we feel agonizing hate towards those who are different. Sooner or later we’ll all crash into reality. Spirits and souls wilt in hatred’s presence and life isn’t as enjoyable as we think it to be without love.

Tolerance is the bonding force that keeps us together. Love is the thing that brings us together, conservative right or liberal left it doesn’t matter, we all share life experience because of the simple fact that we’re humans. Human beings are earthly, temporary, there’s no stopping the crash no matter how much we despise it, no matter how much we hate.
the thought of it. It’s because of that hate that we separate each other, telling others love is only just a one way ticket to dying in a car crash which to some depending on our race or religion is our right. Why do people think themselves better than others? Human beings are notorious for it and have been all their lives.

So many believe that it’s their right as humans to hate people whose life they deem lesser than their own. Instead of crashing down to earth, let us rise up with love.
No Trespassing
Alex Borland