

15th Annual Café Shapiro

February 9 and February 15, 2012

Shapiro Undergraduate Library

Anthology of Selected Poems

and Short Stories

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Café Shapiro

Welcome to Café Shapiro! Café Shapiro began in February 1998 as part of the University's "Year of the Humanities and Arts" (YoHA). Originally conceived as a student coffee break, Café Shapiro takes place in the Shapiro Undergraduate Library during winter evenings in February. It features undergraduate student writers nominated by their professors, many of whom have also been nominated for various writing prizes within the University and beyond.

Students are invited to perform a live reading for a peer audience. For many student writers, Café Shapiro is a first opportunity to read publicly from their work. For others, it provides a fresh audience, and the ability to experience the work of students they may not encounter in writing classes. Through its fifteen years of existence, Café Shapiro has evolved to become a night (or several) of sharing among some of our best undergraduate writers, their friends, families, and the wider community.

Café Shapiro has been popular, and in many years we've created an anthology to provide access to these students' works after the live performance. We are delighted that this year's anthology could be printed, once again, on the Espresso Book Machine (EBM). The University of Michigan acquired the EBM in order to help our users connect with content in the ways most useful to them, thereby supporting the research and learning needs of students, scholars and faculty. For more information about the EBM, visit <http://www.lib.umich.edu/espresso-book-machine>. It's exciting to see our mission being realized in this year's printing of the Café Shapiro Anthology.

We hope you enjoy reading the work of these talented writers.

Shapiro Undergraduate Library Reference Department
Ann Arbor, Michigan
April 2012

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Katharine Allen

Katharine Allen



Junior, History Major

A history major and museum studies minor who has been writing since childhood and has no intention of stopping now. One novel down, a lifetime's worth to go. I just completed the Nanowrimo challenge, finishing my first novel.

Keep the Change

“Hey, don’t ya think it’s time to let that guy go? You know the boss doesn’t like it when they pass out.” Jim pointed to the man I’d been shoveling alcohol into for the last hour. Jim just plain rode on my nerves most nights, endlessly self-righteous and disgustingly naïve but for once I had to admit he was right. The man lay slumped across the counter, heavy sobs shooting out of his heaving frame like thunder.

“Damn, better shove him out the door before he wraps himself around a pole like so much of your Mama’s strawberry taffy,” I said, sneaking my hand into the bag of taffy with which Jim was currently smothering his former-heroine addict cravings and laughing as Jim spat a pink blob out of his mouth and disgust riddled his features into a sloppy frown. “Bastard,” I heard as Jim walked away. “Same to you, old buddy,” I whispered through laughter shaken lips.

I savored the feel of the smooth pliable taffy as my tongue’s strength forced it to bend and twist and my mouth’s acidic rain destroyed its integrity, allowing my teeth to shred and pull until only the flavor was left. I licked my fingers, rubbing them on my shirt, as I pulled my face into a convincing frown and turned to my destroyed heavy-tipper.

“Hey, old boy, time to leave. Ya got your daughter to get back to, remember?” His moan of a response was pathetic in its weakness. “Hey, get your ass off that stool and get out!” I pushed his shoulder and he stumbled back, glaring at me through alcohol-shadowed eyes and slammed a couple bills down on the chipped wood in front of him. His back soon disappeared out the door and I promptly forgot him as the pocketbooks and purses of more customers at the bar flooded my body with anticipation.

My job is simple; serve the drinks; but I do so much more. I’ve made an art of my simple job and my pocketbook cannot

complain. You see, the trick is to know to add just that tiny extra drop, that sliver of a shot to throw in their glasses, to make them that much more intoxicated and financially reasonable in order for the tipping to jump beyond the stretch of the imagination and to make the night worth all of these games.

Everybody has problems; that's what I've been learning since my first day in this hellhole. Everybody wants to tell **me** what's wrong with their stinkin' lives and let me tell you, these people are as fun as my sister's old baby dolls. First, they complain about the boss, "Oh, he's an asshole", "She tortures me...", etc. and then I begin my work; "Hell," I say, "you should quit. I mean, what's a job ya hate doin' for ya. Be assertive! Be in control! Be a man!" I continue till I've got them riled up, exploding with pent up honor and pride and then they mention their kids and I know I'm getting a treat that night. "Oh," I say real sadly, "but if you quit what will you do? It's not just you ya have to think of man. How would they live with a jobless father? What if you go broke? Can't find a job? You know the job markets impossible right now. My buddy's been jobless for years and homeless for weeks. What about the children?" Jesus, I can't believe the looks on all these idiots' faces as I drill my words into their ears and weepin' hearts with scalpel-like precision. I ask them questions, slowly and excruciatingly pleasurable drawing out each of their worries and each of their fears. Holding their self-esteem and hopes in my hands and enjoying as I pop through their childish content like illness-filled water balloons. They shovel out the dough into my bulging pocketbook as they pump more and more nerve-jangling juice into their sodden throats. God! I love my job! Hey, I am God! I control these pathetic creatures in front of me in the hour-filled minutes they sit at my bar. Hell, I'd never touch that damn drink myself; I am the man in control!

Walking home at the end of the night, I'll stop at the all-night liquor store across from the safe-sex store by my apartment. As I stand at the counter, waiting to pay for the crisp and unbroken

playing cards that I crush in my alcohol-coated hands, I glance at the newspaper opened in front of the cashier and the headlines fly out at me like my own little angels, “Drunken Streaker Flees Through Traffic-filled Square”, “Drunk Driver Hits Bus, 5 Killed”, and an add covered with the faces of sickeningly-sweet children that reads, “Friends Don’t Let Friends Drive Drunk”. I look up to find the cashier staring at me, drumming her polished fingers on the counter in front of her; I’ve been ignoring her. I shake my head and free myself from my fantasies as I glide my hand over and into my bulging pocketbook. “Keep the change.”

Morgan Beckett

Morgan Beckett



Junior studying English and Art

Morgan Beckett comes from the small town of Belding, MI where she grew up with her parents and younger brother. She is thrilled to have moved to Ann Arbor for school, the town in which she now happily has called her home for the last three years. Since living here, she has been on a journey filled with surprise, friendship, grief, depression, struggle, reward, victory, and failure, all of which she has found to be fundamental to discovering the way in which she must live her life. Morgan enjoys a good book and an intellectual conversation, just as much as she enjoys going for a walk or laughing at a stupid joke with her friends. Morgan is learning to integrate creativity into writing and writing into her art, which is why she has pursued two majors here at the University in Art and English. Morgan has no expectations for the future which is both frightening and exciting.

Clay

It began with Rachel. Rachel became Loni's best friend in elementary school. They met in the second grade, in Ms. Hart's classroom. Both of the girls' mothers were nurses and married to work-oholic fathers. Rachel's father was a Pediatrician, constantly surrounded by children, but often times neglecting his own. Loni's was a businessman who owned three hotel franchises in the city. Much of his time was spent on the road, traveling to Chicago and in between stores and back again. Loni was drawn to Rachel, maybe because of their similar background, or maybe just because of her wild appearance; Rachel was Loni's first best friend and first person she ever felt she fit in with.

Rachel wore her hair long and down her back, nearly to her waist. The ends of her hair were always tangled up in dirt or food or grime. It was brown with faint curls at the bottom of each strand. Rachel always wore tee shirts and untied sneakers. They were worn because Rachel couldn't stop moving. She was always climbing trees and rolling in the grass and doing flips on the monkey bars or off the swing set. "I bet you can't do this Loni!" And she would arch her back, belly button to the sky and hands and feet flat on the ground. Rachel was a tomboy.

Loni transformed into a tomboy too. Her mother frequently sent her to school in buckle shoes and lace socks. A fluffy bow was often clipped into her short curled locks. Everything in her wardrobe was pastel and floral. And it upset her mother when she came home from school, three days after she met Loni, with grass markings on her knees and stains on her socks. Her bow was missing, and her hair was ratted.

"Loni! What happened to you?"

"I was just playing," Loni replied, head down and left foot meddling with her right. She focused all of her attention on the new scuffs on her black shoes. She could feel her mother's glares cut

through the part in her hair, and Loni's ears began to burn with embarrassment.

“Loni, what did I tell you about these clothes? They can't be ruined! Look at you, I am going to be scrubbing at this dress for hours.”

Her mother's nagging didn't stop Loni from dirtying her shoes and ripping holes in her clothing. The “horseplay,” as her mother called it, continued throughout Loni and Rachel's friendship. Soon Loni exchanged her buckle shoes for sneakers.

Rachel became a mentor for Loni. Rachel taught Loni to do a flip on the monkey bars, to make mud pies, and to burp the A-B-Cs. She even taught Loni bad words, too. Shit. Damn. Asshole. Rachel didn't seem to have a problem saying them, but Loni always giggled whenever she let one of these new vocabulary words slip from her mouth.

Within the month, Loni decided to grow out her hair. At home, she would sneak into her older brother's room while he was at soccer practice and steal one of his tee-shirts. She hid them in her backpack until she got to school and could change in the bathroom, removing the collared shirt and hair ribbons and put on her brother's clothing for playing and pretending. Now when she looked in the mirror, she began to see a tomboy; she was just like Rachel, even though Rachel would always be able to do a better back flip and run faster than Loni. Being a tomboy with Rachel was more fun.

A year after they met, Rachel moved away. Loni noticed her empty desk for an entire week. *Maybe she's just sick. Maybe she went on vacation. She'll be back soon, won't she?* And when she told her mom that she hadn't seen Loni at school, her mom gave her a long face. “Oh honey, Loni moved away. Her dad took a hospital position in Madison.”

Loni cried each night before she went to bed. She fought with her brother and didn't talk to her mom for a week. She still went to school with her brother's tee-shirts hidden in her backpack and still came home with mud on her socks. This only kept up for a month. Soon Loni let Rachel's presence slip through her fingertips; and after a month she was coming to school again, dressed in white socks and button up shoes and an even part in her combed hair.

*

When Loni was sixteen, she met Tony. She knew him from high school. He ran sound for most of the school functions, but she didn't talk to him until after he graduated in the spring. He still lingered around the high school, still stuck in front of the soundboard, and still bummed around the neighborhood until his big moment came. Tony was into music. He played guitar and sang at an underground coffee shop somewhere in the city. He wore ripped jeans and button-down shirts. He kept a knit cap over his shaggy hair in the middle of May. He smoked cigarettes. Tony asked Loni out. He was into Loni, just like he was into music, or so Loni thought. Loni was drawn in because of his interest in her.

Soon after they began dating – (dating meant fooling around in Tony's apartment and going to his Thursday night 'gigs') - Loni asked her mom if she could take piano lessons. Her mother complied without comment, made a call, and handed her some money. Loni began seeing an old widow three blocks away, Ms. Randall. Ms. Randall's house smelled of strong perfume and old air. She never opened her windows and Loni would sometimes hold her breath as Ms. Randall pointed out the correct notes to play for the B-flat Major Scale. Loni struggled to read notes and didn't learn much more than how to play major chords. Loni secretly hoped that she would be able to play with Toni someday, but he never let her.

Seven months of Tony meant seven months in which Loni wore black eyeliner, flannel shirts, and a nose ring. For seven months,

she didn't eat meat, she smoked Parliaments, and listened to experimental music, bobbing her head and closing her eyes to the off-beats. And after seven months, Tony decided to leave. He felt called to go to Oregon. "My friend moved there last year. He wound up with a really good gig. He knows some people." He told her this after one of his Thursday night shows. His 1997 station wagon was already packed with the few boxes that stored all of his belongings.

"You're just going to leave?" Loni could barely squeak the words from her mouth. She was holding back a sob in the bottom of her throat. "What about me?"

"Oh baby." She hated when he called her baby. "We're drifting apart, we're both moving on to bigger and better things. Don't you feel it?"

A tear streaked down Loni's face, and she didn't say a word. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to tell him that she wasted these last seven months on him. He squeezed her hand and kissed her on the cheek. "It will all be fine, Loni."

He turned to his car, opened the driver's side door, and got inside without looking back her way. He left her outside the coffee shop door, wearing his oversized flannel shirt and jeans she bought with a hole in the knee. She watched his station wagon shrink as it moved down the one-way street. Loni was left alone with a new piercing and a smoking habit, which would take her a year to get rid of. After he left, she packed her new clothes, music books, and albums into a cardboard box and put it in the attic. She never heard much from Tony after he left, but she imagined that he might have gotten into drugs and perhaps delivered pizza for a few years.

*

Before Loni graduated high school, she dated Josh. Loni and Josh were both eighteen when they began to date. Josh was a pastor's kid. He grew up going to his father's evangelical church and saying his prayers every night before bed. He knew his Bible verses and volunteered at God's Kitchen on Saturday mornings. Josh was the best-looking boy who ever showed interest in Loni. He had a firm, clean jaw, muscular, broad shoulders, and well-combed hair. He smiled a lot, and it captured Loni. His teeth were straight from three years of braces. Josh was a nice kid. And Loni thought that is what she needed.

Loni went with Josh's family to church the week after they started dating. They sat in the second pew from the front, the seemingly designated spot for the family of the pastor. She was welcomed by smiles, handshakes, and warm hugs all around. Josh asked Loni to come back with him the next week, and she said yes. Josh took Loni out to dinner and to the movies and gave her gifts. He sent her flowers once after her final high school choir concert. Loni sometimes found herself questioning Josh's interest in her. *Doesn't he know that I used to smoke? Doesn't he know that I used to fool around with Tony? Doesn't he see how plain I am?* As she grew older, Loni's face had thinned. She had developed a straight jaw line and her eyes became brighter with age; they seemed to match her pale brown hair. But she couldn't see these changes in her appearance. Although doubt about Josh came in waves, she learned to leap over them. She was comfortable sitting next to Josh on Sunday mornings, in her cotton shirts and pearl earrings. She liked the smiles he gave her.

For the eight months they dated, Josh would pick her up outside of her house and drive her to church with him every Sunday. After Sunday service, the two of them had dinner with his parents and four younger siblings; his mother always made the meal. His parents smiled, straight teeth just like Josh, and ask about her life. Soon she attended a Bible study and began to learn the songs in the church hymnal. Her mother seemed to like the idea of Loni going

to church, even though she never attempted to bring Loni or her brother to a service as they were growing up.

Loni was soon recognized as 'Josh's girlfriend' amongst the congregation. Loni even volunteered with Josh during Church clean up days. He bought her a Bible on her birthday and she stopped wearing eyeliner to embrace her God-given beauty. Loni and Josh made out the night after Loni said the prayer at the dinner table for the first time. Josh made her happy, even though he told her happiness was really because she found God.

After graduation, Josh decided to follow in his father's footsteps and go to seminary in California. Loni was accepted at the University of Illinois and decided to attend in the fall. Loni began to feel Josh drift away from her when he stopped saying, "I love you" at the end of their phone calls. He broke the news to her after family dinner one Sunday in August.

"I just don't think God wants us to be together any more. He is calling me to other places Loni. And He must be calling you to other places too."

Just like Tony had left, Josh left too. And Loni didn't attend her Bible study group any more. Loni entered college single and plain, and with a million doubts about religion.

*

The first semester at the University consisted of weekend trips home and mediocre grades in introductory level classes. She met a few girls, but they never seemed that interested in her. A few girls in her hall politely invited her to study with them from time to time, but Loni never went. She didn't like the way they smiled and asked, "How are you?" without waiting for her reply. Loni's mother told her that college was a time to try something new and suggested that she stop coming home so much. With some thought and online researching, Loni decided the solution would be a class on

ceramics. She had never taken an art class before, the studio was only open on weekends, and the professor had good reviews.

She entered the classroom to find a professor with a long beard and a shiny necklace around his neck. He used his hands when he talked. Soon after students assumed their seats and the syllabus was passed out, the professor placed a mound of clay in front of each student. “We are going to get you started right away. Some of you know what you are doing, and some of you don’t. It doesn’t matter whether or not you’re experienced. We’re all in here to learn, and I am going to grade you based on your improvement.” *Thank Goa*, thought Loni. She was all nervousness and tried to calm herself by gazing at the posters on the wall of African pottery and slip-casting instructions. The shelves all around the room were lined with the creations of the art students. Twisted loops and hollowed shapes, some bowls and plates that were made on the pottery wheel.

“What we are going to do today is create a small sculpture out of coils. I just want you to get a feel for the clay, since not all of you have used it before.” The professor began to pace around the room as he gave instructions. “By the end of studio, I want you to create something, anything, with the clay I have given you. We won’t be keeping these, so don’t feel pressure to become the next Michelangelo within the next two hours.” Loni was calmed by the mellowness of his voice. She reached out and grabbed the clay before her.

“Feel how it forms and molds between your fingertips. Feel the control you have over it, watch it bend with pressure.”

And so Loni did. She felt the cold substance form to the in the palm of her hand. She twisted and ripped the clay; she rolled it around on the table and pushed it back and forth and together again. She began to roll it around in several long coils by gently rotating it with the bottoms of her hands. And no longer was her nervousness eating at her thoughts. Soon she was circling the clay into a curved silhouette of a woman. She used her hands to smooth

and shape until it resembled a female body, curved hips and breasts and bulging belly. The professor walked by and glanced over her shoulder, “Have you worked with clay before?”

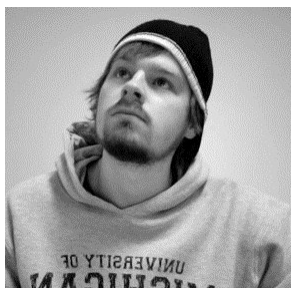
“No.” Loni replied nearly in a whisper. Suddenly her voice was caught in her throat again. *Oh no, he could tell.*

“Very nice.” He raised his eyebrows above the rims of his glasses. He meandered on to look over the shoulder of a student at the next table.

Loni smiled to herself and continued to mold the clay and felt the material form under the control of her own hands.

Robert Corbidge II

Robert Corbidge II



Sophomore, English Major

I'm from Cassopolis, MI. I've always enjoyed writing, but only recently took a writing class. I like to write short stories and poetry. I enjoy reading, composing music, and playing video games. I play the trombone in the Campus Band.

Unfair

This should be fun.

Rides, lemonade, deep-fried fat. Maybe a cinnamon bun?

Yeah, it's a little hot. No, I've got my sunscreen.

It's nothing this teen can't handle.

Yes, I'll hold your hand.

20 bucks for a wristband? The rides better be worth it.

What! Where's The Whip?

It's my favorite.

I'm hungry too. Those three rides are exhausting.

How 'bout a burger and chili cheese fries?

10 bucks? It looks good at least.

Too bad it's cold. This is hardly a feast.

Yeah, I had fun too.

Let's never do this again, Boo.

Electro Ghazal

What better way to get the blood pumping
than a stereo with the bass pumping?

Feel the pulse and bathe in the wave of sound
'til the beat of feet get the place pumping.

Not loud enough? Crank it to eleven
and thrash 'til you can feel your face pumping.

Listen to the thumping of the bass line
with its semi furious pace pumping.

Look at all the enthusiasts bouncing
to the music. Their fists, with grace, pumping.

But Robs, you can't dance, why choose electro?
It beats rap at getting my base pumping.

Take a Seat

Take a seat on the Throne and free yourself
from the monotony that the day brings.

The Stool is a great place to lose oneself
and fight against those who decide to cling.

The Pot may be the place to flush systems,
but don't underestimate its power.

Because the Can does more than suck down chems
and the green fluids that leave your throat sour.

The John is a gathering place for all,
where they may text or carve their humble thoughts.

The Commode holds everyone with its thrall.
But, my friends, don't you dare become distraught.

It isn't just you stuck on the Toilet bowl.
Man is forced to feed the bottomless black hole.

Charlie Engelman

Charlie Engelman



Freshman, Plant Biology Major

Charlie comes from a northern suburb of Chicago where he lives with his mother, father, three sisters, two puppies, two fish, bunny, four chickens, and 50,000 honeybees. On campus he is involved with the Do Random Acts of Kindness Club, University of Michigan Educational Theatre Company, and Beta Theta Pi Fraternity. He writes because it's fun to do and people tend to do things they think are fun. Charlie especially enjoys writing fiction and poetry but is willing to write anything that is assigned as homework in English class.

It's so damn cold

It's like... 30 below.

 It past "chilly" 50 degrees ago
So I'll zip up my zipper and zipper and zipper
But my body's braced to shiver and my mittens feel like paper.

 It snowed so much...it's crazy.

No idea how this happened,
like last night jack frost got drunk
took a shit over everything
and passed out after deciding to kill the sun.

My teeth chatter and dance in fear and wonder
at why the dude, in whose mouth we chatter
would saunter out into that frozen waste heap?

Shut up teeth, you have no brains!
You cause me pains and chatter and chomp
perhaps because it's so damn cold
perhaps because you hate me
but I swear I'll stop flossing
and you're stuck with me so you best understand that
my paper mittens and I, we've got places to go
and nothing can stop us, not even all this snow.

Personals

Name: Fred- early 70s

Searching for: a caring female of similar age for friendship

Hello neighbor! I'm searching for a wonderfully caring lady with whom I can spend my last decades.

I live in a swell home in the south-side suburbs,
a neighborhood so beautiful you may call it make-believe.

I'm slim and fit and love to sing,
wear sneakers in my house and zip-up sweaters are my thing
and I believe all is beautiful.

I always wake up ready to say,
"I think I'll make a snappy new day"
because I know you-my caring female of similar age- are out there

and it's such a good feeling to know you're alive
it's such a happy feeling that comes from inside
and if you have things you want to talk about
call me, I do too!

And heaven knows I have time!
For a half hour on Sundays I'm rather busy,
but my television neighbors always leave in such a jiffy,
and it's super Mr. McFeely always comes to drop the mail,
but my best friend is the mail man...
and "Speedy Delivery" has dropped eight of my sweater packages
from India.

King Friday VIII never leaves the town of Make-Believe.
Lunette has her Dolly and Arthur has his family
is it too much to ask for some semi-consistent company?

because I realized that the only things I look forward to are
half-hour uncommercial-interrupted time slots I spend talking to
myself.

Every day is not snappy.
They're rather quite crappy.
Alone is alone no matter which way you look at it but
I think you can change that.

If *you're* a little lonely,
looking for a place that's homey,
and you feel that if it was up your nose you'd know it.

I know it.
Your place is here.

...So let's make the most of this beautiful day
if you'd like to be together, we might as well say
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?
Wont you be my neighbor?

(831) 748-6492

Liz Fisk

Liz Fisk



Freshman, Pre-Med, Majoring in Psychology

I'm originally from Macomb, Michigan, which is a pretty small and uninteresting place. If I'm not doing homework, I'm usually either *attempting* to play electric guitar, drawing, reading, writing, or doing that head-bob thing to my favorite music. I'm a secret history buff. I collect awesome hats.

Just Another Ghost Story

I'm a pretty normal guy, just your run of the mill averagely above-average brown eyed stubbly five-foot-something dude. As a matter of fact, the only thing that really sets me apart from your average Joe Cool is the part where I'm dead. Not dead on my feet or dead tired or whatever, the kind of dead that I am can't be waved off with a shot of five hour energy. I'm talking legitly dead. Pushing up daisies, sleeping with the fishes, doing the big snooze, whatever you call it. Back in what I like to call BD, or 'before death' for you laypeople, I was never what you'd call a superstitious type. Or a church type. Or a flat out believer type at all, for that matter. Nope, it was only after it happened that I realized that going kaput didn't necessarily mean the end. All it meant was a continuation of the same old routine, except not nearly as enjoyable now, since, as you can imagine, insubstantial ghosts like me can't eat. Our hands just go right through the food.

I can't really remember how the big moment happened, but when I asked Victor, he was all like, 'You fell off the trapeze, sir! It was quite an amazing spectacle to watch! Your best work yet, I daresay!'

Or something like that. Seriously, half the time I can't even understand him through his accent.

Yes, Victor always talks with this annoying turn of the century overly proper Victorian British accent, but even without taking that into account, he's still the most obnoxious person ever. If there's one thing that annoys me more than not being able to eat, or even the whole 'being dead' thing in general, it's Victor. And since he's the only other dead person who bothers to hang around the circus, and since not-dead people can't see or hear me, I'm pretty much stuck with nothing but him for company. Lucky me.

At the moment, me and him stand ringside, watching as all the carnies clean up after their latest performance, the multi-colored

spotlights highlighting this finishing act that nobody stuck around to see. The gaudy rays shining down on gaudier outfits make the whole scene into a giant kaleidoscope, through which obese clowns bumble past sideshow weirdies in various flavors of odd, and animal trainers try to coerce colorful beasts around creeping cleanup crew sweepers. In the ring, there was a general feel of what one could call ‘controlled chaos’, or maybe ‘barely-reigned-in madness’.

Outside the glowing vaudeville, me and Victor stand in an unlit sea of empty seats the color of the old bricks one finds in dark, creepy alleys, the ones that rapists and drug peddlers love most. Beyond the red sea, dimly burning bulbs bathe the crimson wall in a dull glow, like so many lighthouses warning idiots that there was a wall ahead, and that they should probably try not to walk into it. This wall stretches up and up until, somewhere out of reach of the lights, it supposedly forms the peak of the big top. But it’s really too dark to tell for sure.

At the moment, I’m looking up at the trapeze, mentally going through one of my old routines, the one where I walk the tightrope, then jump like a pro up and off onto the swinging trapeze bar, then launch into a totally awesome acrobatic flipping and spinning routine. I’m just getting to the part where things get really epic and I do a triple flip and release, when Victor, of course, feels the need to break me out of my thoughts with yet another one of his dumb questions.

“Say, sir,” he says, “Seeing as we’re insubstantial, how do you suppose it is that we can stand on the floor without falling through? Isn’t that rather queer?”

The only thing queer here is Victor, I think to myself. I give him a look that I hope is penetrating enough to get him to shut his pie hole, even though I know that nothing I could muster could ever put a cap on his babble. How the heck am I even supposed to

know? It's just another one of those things that I'm too lazy to bother questioning.

I can walk through tables and chairs. I can't pick up a French fry. I don't fall through floors. That's just how it is.

"My name is Jacob," I say instead of answering his question, adding for emphasis in the type of slow, overly loud tone one would use when ordering takeout from a Chinese restaurant run by Chinese people, "*Call me Jacob*. This isn't some black tie restaurant, you aren't my waiter, and you don't need to call me 'sir'."

It's almost like he doesn't know my name, even though he does.

"Whatever you say, sir," pipes back Victor, voice dripping with Britain.

He's just trying to troll me now. If there's one thing he loves more than bothering me with stupid questions, it's trolling. I swear, if he wasn't dead already, I'd have killed him myself by now. I wonder to myself if my fist would be able to make contact with his face, or if it would just go through it like it did with everything else.

In the end though, I just decide that ignoring him is my best bet, since it doesn't involve me having to move.

Victor, deciding I was too emotionally flat to be any fun at the moment, did a sort of hop-skip down into the ring, prancing unseen around the clowns and sweeper dudes and other sideshow accoutrements. In his weird outfit, which consists of a blah colored newsboy hat over his shaggy brown hair, some kind of fugly peasant shirt to cover up his skinny stick bod, and, of all things, suspenders to hold up his tasteless pants, he looks like just another side show freak. In theory, he's in his early twenties, but in actuality, he has all the loving maturity of those chubby toddlers you see in grocery stores, the ones that scream for candy and push around other chubby toddlers. Yeah.

I gaze back up at the trapeze and rub my five o' clock shadow, which is and will always be the same length. That's a good thing, since my hands wouldn't have been able to hold a razor anyway. Apparently, when you die, you stop aging and changing and all that.

That's one perk of being dead, no more shaving. Also, I'm pretty sure dying has done wonders for my figure, although that's up for debate.

And speaking of not aging, that brought me to another reason why Victor is a weird-o, besides the fact that he has a lingering smell of old attic meets grandma's perfume.

The thing about Victor was that he died back in the eighteen hundreds. That probably accounts for some of his general weirdness and lacking fashion sense, as well as why he talks like a black and white movie. I never did ask him how he died, but I'm pretty sure one of these days he'll probably tell me.

Actually, chances are he already did and I'd just blocked him out, because I'm a caring person like that.

The creepy thing is that, if you think about it, he's really just a roughly two hundred plus year old geezer stuck in the ghostly fail bod of a twenty something. It's hard to believe though, the way he flounces around, cavorting himself all over the place like some kind of loopy tart, going blah-this and blah-that in British.

Even creepier, freaky dead people from the seventeen hundreds are still lurking around. What a lovely thought to fall asleep to.

Speaking of lurkers, I watch as Victor slinks up behind one of the broom pushers in the cleanup crew, even though the fact that he's dead and invisible makes the whole sneaking thing pretty redundant.

He puts his face up against the guy's ear, and whispers,
“*Waaaaankerrrr...*”

The guy jumps a little and looks around with that same derpy look that everyone gets when they hear something that's not there. After a few seconds of fruitless searching, he goes back to his toil with a shrug, probably deciding he's hearing things, or that it's just the wind, or whatever uncreative rationing people come up with in those cliché horror movies.

“What the hell is a wanker anyway?” I call at him.

Victor's favorite word ever is probably wanker. In his world, everyone is a wanker, especially me. I am the chief wanker.

“A wanker,” he informs me with a flick of his wrist, as if this was something everyone should have been born knowing, “Is, quite obviously, one who wanks.”

I give him a look, and I'm about to ask him what exactly wanking is, but then I decide that, no, I don't really care enough to bother listening to whatever answer he's going to throw back at me.

And yes, despite the fact that ghosts are usually invisible to people, there are cases where we can make our presence known. If I concentrate my hardest, I can briefly regain a little substantialness for a second, enough to move something an inch or poke someone's shoulder, or perhaps to make my voice faintly heard, but it's exerting as hell, and I can only do it once in a while, for a moment.

Victor is a lot better at this than me, as in he can actually pick things up and hold them in his hand for a few minutes, or even make himself completely visible to the living for a moment. I don't know what would be scarier, seeing something floating through the air at you, or seeing Victor's mug.

Anyway, the whole creeping on people thing got old for me after the first week. Everyone had the same reaction anyway. You'd whisper something at them, or you'd touch their shoulder, and they'd look around, all confused because they knew that there's nobody nearby who could have done that. Then, spoiler alert, they always end up mentally talking themselves out of hearing or feeling anything. After all, if something's not rational, it must not exist.

Victor, unlike me, never seems to tire of bothering the living. He finds some sort of sadistic fascination in creeping people out, I'm sure. You'd think that after all this time he'd have given it up, but no. Instead, he continues to invent ever more elaborate ways of trying to make his presence known. It's like a game for him—let's see what I can get away with doing before they're forced to admit that they aren't just imagining it.

Now bored with his broom-wielding victim, Victor swaggers over to more fertile territory, a young lady who calls herself Trixie. She's a trapeze artist, like I was, and we used to work together before I kicked the bucket. She looks like the type you'd expect to see in the circus -- pink shorty short hair that screams cotton candy, more piercings and nose rings than a herd of cattle, tattoos on at least half of her visible skin, and probably more tattoos elsewhere. The length of her skirt seems to be in perpetual competition to be shorter than the length of her hair, and, from my point of view, the skirt is definitely winning.

Victor seems to ponder her for a moment, then he reaches down and tweaks her butt.

So much for Victorians being proper.

"God dammit!" cries Trixie, voice like an overzealous soap opera actress trying for a bad imitation of rage. She whirls around, glaring right through Victor without the faintest idea he's even there, "Who just grabbed my ass?!"

Of course, there was nobody she could see within ass-grabbing distance, but people, being people, will rationalize. Her eyes fall on the closest person to her, a real winner by the name of Nash. Nash's job is basically to do whatever anyone else tells him to. His most defining feature, aside from the fact that his hair hangs over his eyes and his pants hang around his scrawny teenage knees, is that his mouth is always open. He's like that weird kid in the back of the class room you always heard panting up your neck, as in he's a major mouth breather. He gives off that creepy Darth Vader vibe, if you know what I mean.

"You," she says, pointing a ring studded finger dramatically in his general direction, "Why the hell are you ass grabbing?!"

"... Whut?" pants Nash, his delayed response and pronunciation of the word seeming to mirror his general derp-ness, "I ain't grabbin' no ass."

"Don't lie, I felt your freaky shrunken monkey hands touch me!" insists Trixie, getting maybe a B plus in shrillness and overall believability.

If there's one thing about Trixie that's shorter than her hair and skirt, it's her fuse. It kind of made me feel sorry for Nash, but Victor, who was giggling to himself off to the side, didn't seem to share my sentiment.

"You bothering my woman, shrimp?" something growls from behind Nash.

The owner of the baritone snarl is, most accurately, what you'd get if you could shrink down a t-rex, and make a human caricature of it. I'd have sworn he was pumping 'roids, had the circus paid enough for such luxuries. He has even more tattoos than Trixie, and I was willing to bet a good night's sleep that most of them are either from gangs or prison. His spiked up green mohawk adds a good three or four inches to his stature— which is a lot for him.

The thing is, he's ... vertically challenged. As in you'd have to shrink the t-rex down a whole lot. Legit, he comes up to about crotch height on a normal guy. But trust me on this one, that doesn't make him any less of a beast.

As for him and Trixie, well, they've been dating on and off for a grand total of three weeks. And it's hilarious because she's, like, twice his height.

"S-Sharkey!" stammers Nash with a start, turning around to look down at the boulder of a guy.

Sharkey crosses his buff arms, looking for all the world like some sort of personal fitness trainer from hell.

"I said, you touch my woman?"

"N-No," stutters Nash, his mouth-breathing going up in volume a few decibels, "I wasn't even near her!"

"That ain't what she said."

Nash backs away a little, seeming to ponder what he could possibly do to sustain the least possible amount of injury. It's almost like you can hear the rust grinding together as his mental cogs turn. Whatever thinking he's doing right now, it looks like really hard work. It's like watching grandma trying to climb ten stories of stairs.

At last, he says, "I'm sorry! I promise I won't touch yer lady again!"

Ah, the old pleading guilty technique. Nash is probably used to this; he ends up taking the blame for most of Victor's handiwork—the time Victor set all the circus animals loose, the time Victor covered all the dressing room mirrors with nail polish drawn depictions of flying monkeys, the time Victor clogged all the toilets with balls of socks tied together, all credited to Nash. Everyone already assumes Nash did it anyway, so there's no use denying it, I

suppose, especially in this case, when continued denial will probably lead to a beating from Sharkey.

“Seeing as you’re so sorry, I’ll let you off with a warning this time,” Sharkey leers up at him, “But if I catch you touching what’s mine again, I’ll make sure you’re *really* sorry.”

Sharkey cracks one of his knuckles. Nash closes his yap for once and gulps audibly.

“Yessir,” he mutters.

Sharkey turns and starts lumbering away, presumably to go kick some puppies or slap the ice cream out of little kids’ hands.

And then Victor strikes again. Well, you didn’t really think a sadist type like him would let them off that easy, right?

Victor flounces after Sharkey and bends down, whispering in his ear, “*Miiidgettiii.*”

Sharkey about-faces like his butt’s been torched with a flamethrower, and roars, “WHO SAID THE ‘M’ WORD?!”

Everyone looks over at him. The one unspoken rule of the big top has been broken. Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, says the ‘M’ word. Unless, of course, you’re already dead like Victor.

He thunders at Nash, “You just called me the ‘M’ word, didn’t you?!”

“No!” cries Nash, feet involuntarily backing up in a full reverse.

“Don’t lie, I heard you!” yells Sharkey. And he launches himself at Nash, fists flailing.

Nash turns tail and flounders off as fast as his grubby, unlaced shoes can carry him.

Sharkey is really fast for such a little dude, and Nash, well, he's not winning any Olympic medals anytime soon, mostly because he keeps stumbling over his falling down pants. So it's a pretty close race, Nash just barely managing to stay ahead of Sharkey's fists of fury.

Trixie cries, "Oh, Sharkey, don't hurt him!" But we all know she's just making noise for the attention factor.

"I say," says Victor, watching the havoc he'd caused with a self-satisfied smirk, "This is better than what any playwright could think up."

"You are a cold, lewd person," I inform him as Sharkey catches up to Nash and tackles him by the ankles, "And your schadenfreude is showing."

"I'm surprised you even know what the world 'schadenfreude' means, sir," said Victor, raising an eyebrow.

In case you never learned German, 'schadenfreude' is German for 'getting off on other people's pain'. That's one thing I learned from four years of high school foreign language. That, and 'scheiße kopf hund' —shit head dog. And those are really the only phrases you need to know when going to Germany, right?

As I watch Nash's shins receive a good pummeling, I say, "Aren't there some kind of rules that say you can't screw around with the living, or something?"

"Actually," says Victor, his fingertip poking at the brim of his hat, inching it up higher, "No. But there are other strict procedures. That's the thing about death—it's a lot like life, except there's rules. Due to the fact that I've been around so long, and have met and witnessed the passing of so many souls, I've come to realize that there are two, unalienable laws governing the dead. And neither of them say I can't have a little fun with the living now and again."

“What are the rules then?” I ask as Nash manages to break away and make a limping escape over the low wall that keeps the normal people in the seats from contaminating the unique strain of bizarre we have growing here under the big top. Since Sharkey’s an ‘M’ word, the only way that he’s getting over that wall is with either some fancy pole vaulting or the help of a radioactive spider, so it seems like Nash has caught a temporary reprieve.

“Rule number one,” says Victor, “Whichever clothes you die in are what you must wear for all eternity.”

“What?” I snort, “You’re shitting me.”

“I don’t even want to ponder what that’s supposed to mean,” says Victor.

“It means that you’re full of it. You’re seriously trying to tell me that all those drunken frat boys that dressed up like ancient Greece, then went and overdosed on alcohol and died are stuck like that forever?”

“Naturally,” says Victor, “Your local Mal-Mart doesn’t exactly have a fashion line for the dead.”

“It’s Wal-Mart.”

“Rule number two,” says Victor, disbursing my comment with a wave of his hand, “If your soul isn’t at peace, then you can’t move on.”

“What?” I say, “That’s a dumb rule. Is anyone’s soul even ever completely at peace?”

“Not really,” says Victor, fingers toying with his hat again, “But as long as it’s mostly at peace, then you’ll be able to move on. Actually, I’m quite sure that most people move on right after they die, otherwise the world would be so full of the dead that you and I would scarcely be able to move around due to all the souls. But

some deeply unsettled people like us linger, unable to reach the level of inner peace needed for departure to whatever's next. For some it's due to unfinished business, for others, they can't bear to leave their beloveds behind. Some just aren't yet ready to move on... But there are other reasons as well..."

"Such as," he adds in a low voice, smiling creepily to himself, "*Murrrrderrrr...*"

Seriously, this guy has some deep seeded issues. He's the reason little kids are afraid to walk alone into dark rooms.

"So what is it for you, huh?" I snap at him, annoyed at him for being such a raging creeper, "Why are you even still here?"

"I've already told you that," Victor informs me, "Quite frankly, I'm hurt that you didn't bother to listen."

"*Quite frankly*," I say in a bad imitation of his accent, "I rarely bother to listen to you."

"Well, listen this time, would you?" huffs Victor, "I'm still here because I was murdered."

"Wow, gee, I wonder why anyone would ever want to murder you," I snark, "Especially since you have such a charming and compassionate personality."

"Believe it or not, it wasn't my eloquence and refined manner that did me in," says Victor, ignoring my sarcasm, "I was in line to inherit my elderly father's company, and, with it, a small fortune. It was a fortune that more than a few people were jealous of. And, with the state of affairs as they were, there were a number of people who could have benefited from my death, both financially and otherwise. One night—"

“Urrgh, is this another one of your long boring stories where half the words are over three syllables?” I groan, adding melodramatically, “Spare me, I can’t take it anymore.”

“Don’t interrupt me, wanker,” snaps Victor.

I pull an Olympic sized eye-roll sort of deal.

Seeing that I’m quiet again, Victor continues, “As I was saying, one night, my father held a dinner party at our mansion for all the local socialites. I believe someone there slipped a draft of poison into my drink, although I can’t say for certain. All I know is, I was dead as a doornail before dessert, and my murder was left unsolved. And despite all the inspectors my father hired to find the killer, and all my own careful clue searching, and all the years I spent tailing dinner guest after dinner guest, my murder is still unsolved. The killer hid their tracks too well. And in order for me to move on to what’s next – Heaven, Nibbana, Summerland, Jannah, Tuat, whichever it might be, my murder needed to be solved, and the killer brought to justice. But the time for that has already passed— whoever committed the crime, they lived and died scot-free. So, in effect, I’m stuck in this ghostly purgatory. Forever.”

Somehow, I doubt that Victor would have ended up in Heaven anyway. More like Hell, Patala, Jahannum, or the Underworld.

I yawn, expressing my raging enthusiasm. “...Cool story bro.”

Victor purses his lips, looking displeased at the lack of effect his story had on me.

“Well, I guess that explains your creepy fancy getup,” I say, deciding to humor him.

“This?” snorts Victor, gesturing at his outfit, “Fancy? This is the Victorian equivalent of a t-shirt and jeans. I was never one for dressing up, especially for the stiff pricks my father kept around.”

I make an androgynous sort of noise, the kind that can really go either way. These noises are great for when you want to sound like you're listening but you really aren't.

"...Well, are you going to tell me why you're still around?" he asks after a moment.

I think about it. Actually, there really isn't a reason I should still be here. I like to think of myself as a pretty mellow dude, or at least as mellow as the next guy, not to mention I'm a riot at parties, so I should be a hot commodity in any afterlife that has any taste in fun whatsoever.

I felt totally at peace, so why the heck didn't I get to see the pearly gates?

"...I don't know," I say after a moment, bemused.

"Well, it must be something," pushes Victor.

"Seriously, I have no idea."

"Unfinished business?"

"I think before I croaked I left the bathroom light on, could that be it?"

Victor rolls his eyes. "Not likely. Is it your family, perhaps? You can't bear the thought of leaving them behind?"

"Nope," I say, "I doubt it's that. My parents were a pair of yuppies who decided to birth a yuppie pack. And by pack I mean four brothers and three sisters, all of whom spent most of their time fighting with me, stealing my stuff, and, when I was younger, trying to dress me in drag."

"Fascinating," says Victor, "That explains everything."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

“Oh, nothing,” says Victor, “Nothing at all.”

I stare at Victor for a moment, then say, “Either way, I wanted to join the circus ever since I was a little kid. My parents thought that it was just a phase, but then when I really did run off and start working here after high school, well, I was pretty much dead to them at that point.”

“That sounds pretty harsh,” says Victor, “They couldn’t have been that bad.”

“They were pretty bad,” I say, “They were yuppies, after all.”

“Touché,” says Victor.

“But really, with all their other ‘non-disappointment’ kids, they didn’t miss me all that much,” I say, “They’re probably over my death already; if they even realize I’m dead, that is. And as for my siblings, well, there were so many of us that I doubt they even noticed that I ran away. And none of them even friended me on Facebook, so yeah, what does that tell you?”

“Not much, since I haven’t a clue what a face book is,” says Victor, “In any case, your problem must be a deep, boiling, passionate and steamy romance.”

“Haha,” I say, “No.”

“Why not?” asks Victor, “A wanker like you can’t impress a lady? Or is it that you were in a relationship, but your girl was such a shrew that it was a relief to escape her in the afterlife?”

“I’m surprised you don’t already know the answer to that one,” I say, “The way you stalk and creep on everybody. You’d think a lurker like you would be up to date on the personal love life of everyone under the big top.”

“I try,” says Victor, beaming as if I’ve just given him some kind of grand complement, “But at times the finer details tend to slip even my top-notch mind.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, all the people here are weirdos,” I say, “I mean, seriously, can you picture any of the women here raising your babies?”

“I hear the bearded lady has a wonderful personality,” says Victor.

“I’m holding out for a nice, normal girl,” I say with a slight facial twitch, “Without hang-ups. Or facial hair. Or, I was, anyway. But now that I’m dead that pretty much put a big obstacle right in the middle of my love life for the next, uh, let’s see, eternity or so.”

“Don’t be so glum about it, sir,” says Victor with a wink, “There are a lot worse things you can do with yourself besides marriage.”

I contemplate this, and decide that a lot of the time his words of wisdom sound suspiciously like BS kicked around and spat out on a cherry soda high after a night or two of no sleep.

And speaking of sleep, I could use some about now. So I plop down on the ground, right there amongst the empty seats.

“Why on earth do you always do that?” questioned Victor, sitting cross legged a few feet away, watching me through squinted auburn eyes, as if observing a case study.

“Do what?” I ask, rolling over so I don’t have to look at his mug. I already knew perfectly well ‘what’, but I want to rub this moment in a little longer. Sleeping is one of the few things I can do that, for some reason, actually annoys Victor. So that means it’s my turn to troll.

“That whole sleeping thing,” says Victor, getting to his feet, walking over to my other side, and plopping himself back down in my face again, “You do know that ghosts don’t need to do that,

yes? The whole point of sleep is to repair and rejuvenate the body, and since you have no body anymore, the whole exercise is rather pointless, don't you agree?"

There he goes again, doing more of his British blahblahblah.

"I do it to get away from you," I answer, rolling back over.

Well, that's at least partially true. But I mostly sleep because of dreams. I like dreams because a) Victor usually isn't in them, and b) They're the one place where I can be on the trapeze again. Because, as you know, my phantom hands can no longer grab the trapeze bars, so I'm pretty much grounded forever.

Victor side swaps again, planting himself in front of my face. "I just think lying there doing nothing is decidedly dull."

"It's better than whatever you do instead of sleeping," I grumble, "Like, say, trying to freak people out, vandalizing property, or watching me sleep."

I close my eyes, trying to instill upon him that this conversation is over. But, as always, he isn't having any of it.

"How, sir, would you know what I do when you're sleeping? You're asleep while I'm doing it."

Breathe, I tell myself, just breathe. If you pretend like you're sleeping, he'll get bored and go away, just like playing possum.

"Are you still awake, sir?" asks Victor, prodding me in the arm with his finger. Well, that answers one question, at least. Ghosts are tangible to other ghosts, so punching Victor in the face is now back on the table as a legitimate possibility.

"No," I mumble.

I can still feel him staring at me, so I snap, without opening my eyes, “Go graffiti a bad word on one of the trailers or something.”

“What a quaint idea,” decides Victor. I hear a whoosh as he dashes off, presumably in search of spray paint.

Weird-o.

I sigh, crossing my fingers for a Victor-free lucid dream as I drift off...

... The seats below me are free of all the usual gawking adults and loud sticky-from-cotton-candy children who chew popcorn with their mouths open. Today is a rehearsal; it's a 'we mess up here so we don't mess up in front of the crowd' sort of deal.

I stand on top of a platform, savoring the height as I wait for Trixie, who is hanging upside down by her knees on the catch trap, to give the word.

Catch trap. Noun. The trapeze bar that the catcher hangs on and yoinks people out of the air from.

Catcher. Noun. What Trixie is. It's the person who catches and tosses around the flyer, (usually me,) in a trapeze act. The flyer does all the real tricks; the catcher pretty much just swings around and helps them.

“Hup!” Trixie shouts after a moment, just before she reaches the peak of her swing.

Hup. Interjection. The circus way of saying 'jump off the platform already!'

I leap out over the open nothingness, suspended over empty air for a moment, before my hands clasp around Trixie's.

We swing for a moment, connected, before she releases my hands. I summersault through the openness again before my legs catch against the fly bar, and I pendulum upwards, far above the seats.

Fly Bar. Noun. Well this one should be obvious, it's the trapeze bar that the flyer, (again, in case you forgot, almost always me,) uses to do all their awesome tricks.

"Listo!" cries Trixie.

Listo. Interjection. Circus speak for, 'I have enough height in my swing to catch you, so quit showing off and let go of the fly bar!'

I release the fly bar, and do a barrel roll downward, until Trixie nabs me by the ankles.

Cue the gasps and applause from the nonexistent audience.

Alive. Adjective. How I feel right now this high above the ground. I would have been a stunt pilot, but that would have been playing it too safe for my tastes.

What I'm wearing is shorts and a tight fitting navy tee shirt with 'Blink-182' slapped across the front. Is this the best thing to wear while on the trapeze? Probably not. But I do it anyway, because this is just a rehearsal, and I don't really like wearing the tight fitting suit that I have to wear during the real show. It makes me feel like a square. Plus, it's uncomfortable.

Trixie lets go of me at the peak of her swing, and I flip, and she catches my hands. We swing back again, and she throws me up high, toward the highest fly bar in the trapeze. I soar upward, executing a flawless triple roll toward that supposed place where the unseen tip of the big top is.

Triple roll. Verb. A trick that looks pretty dark epic, especially when I'm doing it.

I reach my hands out as I exit the last roll and grab the bar. Only something's wrong. The bar feels like Flubber slimed all over it. It's slick and slippery, covered over in a fine layer of who-knows-what.

I manage to cling for a moment, before the velocity of my swing makes my hands slip.

There's no way to stop it. My fingers slide off the bar, and a moment later, I'm half flying, half falling, that stomach-in-throat feeling I lived for a moment ago suddenly horrifying.

Back in the day, and I'm talking the eighteen hundreds here, circuses never had nets. All they had was a bunch of mattresses lined up under the trapeze. No, really, I'm serious. But obviously, a six inch thick mattress is probably not going to let you walk away from a fifty foot fall. People managed to make this cognitive leap at some point, and circuses started switching over to nets.

Nowadays, almost every circus has a net to catch fallers, except for a few exceptions.

The thing about this circus is that it's an exception.

Dead. Adjective. What I will be in about one point seven seconds, give or take air resistance...

My eyes fly open before I hit, and I sit up, making a strangled noise. It's all coming back to me now—the rehearsal, the bizarre slippery bar, and the fall...

Victor, being the creeper that he is, is sitting a few yards away, looking at me. See, I wasn't exaggerating when I said he watches me sleep. He really does.

"I know why I can't move on!" I exclaim.

"Really?" asks Victor, "Why?"

“I was murdered!” I said, “On the day I died during rehearsal, someone put something slippery all over my fly bar! Someone killed me, on purpose!”

It all made sense. That bar didn’t lube itself up. Well, as least they’d had the good sense to off me when I wasn’t dressed up in that dorky trapeze outfit, else I would have looked like a flamer for all eternity.

“Who was it?” asks Victor.

“I’m not sure...” I admit, “But I bet it was Sharkey. He hates everyone, and he especially hated me because I wasn’t as afraid of him as everyone else.”

It’s true, I was never really that afraid of him. I struggle with taking a mini-me with a green mohawk seriously. Once I’d even called him a midget to his face, and he tried to beat me up. He did give my shins a pretty good pummeling, and I think he nearly took off one of my toes, but I managed one-up him when I chucked him into an elephant watering tub before he could turn my legs into a pulp. He’d never messed with me since, but if looks could kill, he would have murdered me hundreds of times over with the glares he shot at me. It probably didn’t help that I took every opportunity possible to make off-handed remarks about how *little* I thought of him.

Anyway, I think he must have been biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment to exact his revenge. Considering his criminal record and his ability to hold a grudge for years on end, I’m really not surprised he eventually did me in.

“No, it wouldn’t have been him,” says Victor, doing that thing where he puts up a finger to draw attention to the fact that he’s about to say something he thinks is profound.

The profundity is, “He’s much too suspicious to have done it.”

“That makes no sense,” I say, “He had all the motives and everything. There’s no doubt.”

“Think about it,” says Victor, “It’s never the one you most suspect.”

“Well, Nancy Drew, who do you think it was then?”

“What about Nash?” questions Victor.

“Nash?”

“Nash.”

“We are talking about the same mouth-breather loser here, right?”

“Naturally,” says Victor, adjusting his hat.

I purse my lips. “Why would you suspect him?”

“He’s obviously the lowest one on the totem pole,” says Victor, “Therefore, he has the most to gain.”

“I don’t follow.”

Victor sighs, giving me a look like I’m an ignorant five-year-old who needs to be fed information in pre-chewed, bite-sized spoonfuls.

“Think about it,” he says, “He’s not exactly being paid in diamonds here. And the fact that he’s basically everyone else’s foot stool means that, most likely, he has some form of bottled up anger. Why else do you think the murderer is always the butler in murder mysteries? Nash is probably not bright enough to pull anything off himself, however it’s perfectly conceivable that someone else offered him something to do their dirty work.”

“Like a payoff?” I ask.

“There you go,” says Victor.

“Who would have paid him off then?” I ask, still skeptical.

“Any number of people who are too smart or squeamish to get their own hands dirty,” replies Victor.

“Like Sharkey,” I say matter-of-factly.

“Or,” says Victor, splaying his fingers out in front of him, then curling them back in with a slow wavelike motion, as if grasping at some existential truth I was obviously too dense to see.

He says, “There’s always Trixie.”

“Oh, come on,” I snort, “Sure, she’s got a tude on her, but I honestly can’t see her killing anyone.”

Especially not me. It’s no secret that whenever I was around, she acted even more like a Beverly Hills bred diva, her hips swinging farther left and right when she walked, her voice sounding even more like that of a phone sex operator. I think it was pretty obvious she had the hots for me, but, like I said before, I seriously couldn’t see her being my baby momma. Can you imagine what sort of histrionic, demanding kids we’d have? No thanks. I really should have hinted at her that it wasn’t happening, but I’ll admit, I kind of liked the extra attention.

Either way, if she liked me, she wouldn’t have killed me.

“Her ‘tude’ isn’t the only thing that stands out to me,” says Victor, “No, what speaks to me more is her ambition.”

I tilt my head to one side.

Victor rolls his eyes. “You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed the way she walks, with that hip swagger, and the way she talks, overelaborating every word. Not to mention she hand-gestures like she’s some kind of pantomime.”

“So do you,” I say.

Victor chooses to ignore my comment. “She has that manner about her, the one people have when they aren’t content anywhere but the biggest stage Hollywood can offer them.”

“...And?” I say.

“You always were a better acrobat than she was,” states Victor, “That’s why you were always the flyer. How would she ever have been discovered by some big shot talent scout with you stealing the spotlight? Either way, once you were out of the picture, she got promoted to flyer. There’s motive for you.”

“Wait, you thought I was a better trapeze artist than her?” I say, raising an eyebrow, “Really?”

“Of course, sir, by a large margin, but that’s beside the point here.”

“Huh,” I say.

I knew I was awesome, it just feels good to have it acknowledged.

“The point is,” says Victor, waving his hand to emphasize said point, “You’re being narrow-minded by not considering anyone besides Sharkey.”

I don’t really hear his last sentence, as I’m too busy watching his hands flail. It’s like they never stop moving. They’re always flopping and fluttering around, as if his fingers are somehow vital instruments in articulating words.

“...Sir. Are you even listening to me?” questions Victor, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

“Sure. Sure I am.”

Victor snorts. “Honestly, half the time I don’t even know why I bother trying to converse with a wanker like you.”

“I know,” I say in mock sympathy, “You could be doing so many other things. Like shaving off the bearded lady’s beard while she’s sleeping. That’s always a good time for you, isn’t it?”

“You make a valid point,” says Victor.

“Either way, I already know it was Sharkey,” I say, “I just have to prove it and do that whole ‘bring them to justice’ thing or whatever. It won’t be that hard.”

“I already told you, Sharkey’s too obvious,” says Victor, “It wouldn’t be any fun if it was him.”

Referring to my murder as fun. That’s so typical of him.

“As a matter of fact,” continues Victor with a flick of his hand, “I’ll help you solve your murder, just to prove you wrong.”

Now that there is even more typically Victor.

“And,” he adds, “Because it would be a friendly gesture, and I like to think of us as friends.”

Well, that was different.

I glance over at him, eyebrows raised in surprise. “You think of me as a friend?”

“Well of course I do, sir,” says Victor, “Why else would I hang around you all the time?”

“Because you think annoying me is fun?”

“Well, yes, that too. But mostly because I enjoy your company. Why, don’t you think of us as friends?”

I hesitate, not sure what to say. It's not that I never had friends back in BD... I mean, I had a lot of Facebook friends. A couple thousand, actually. I just didn't have as many 'face-to-face' friends, if you know what I mean. And it wasn't because I'm not a likeable guy, because I'll have you know I'm very likeable. It's just that everyone around the circus was weird, and I don't make it a habit to hang with weirdos, especially not people with a brand of bizarre as strong as Victor's...

But what ends up coming out of my mouth is, "Sure. Yeah, we're friends."

"Brilliant!" said Victor, "So you'd like my help in solving your murder?"

"Fine," I say, "But when we find out it was Sharkey, you'll have to eat your words."

Victor makes a 'pssh' sort of noise. "If Sharkey's the culprit, I'll eat my hat."

I visualize Victor chowing down on his own hat. "Now that's what I call entertainment."

"So are we going to solve a murder or what?" asks Victor.

"Yeah," I say, adding, "And since you're such a know-it-all when it comes to committing crimes, where do you think we should start looking for clues?"

"You flatter me," says Victor, one side of his mouth turning upwards into a smile, "I say we start in the place that will tell us the most about our suspects... their trailers."

"Sounds legit enough to me," I say.

And with that, we head out of the big top, over toward the carnie sleeping quarters.

When we get there, the sparkling rays of the freshly risen sun artfully highlight the word ‘Wanker’ scrawled upon the side of each trailer in flowing, calligraphic handwriting. Apparently Victor had decided to take up last night’s suggestion.

“Amazing,” I say flatly, “You’ve really outdone yourself this time. A work of art. A real Da Vinci.”

“Aren’t they though?” says Victor, raising his chin proudly, “Except the carnies credited the neighborhood hooligans for the masterpieces you see before you.”

He sighs. “Will I ever get the recognition I deserve?”

“Is this sort of trouble making attention seeking vandalism thing seriously what you’ve been up to for the past two hundred and some odd years?” I ask, “Because if that’s true, that’s pretty sad.”

“Of course not,” says Victor as we approach the first trailer, which I’m pretty sure is Nash’s, “My life after death has been full of adventure, suspense, love, and all that other fluff you read about in story books.”

“Only if being an annoying pain in the ass falls under the adventure and suspense category,” I say.

“I’m positive it does,” says Victor, “But I’ve had even better adventures than that.”

He stops outside the trailer door, holding up a hand, his pointer finger up, the others curled slightly. He’s got that ‘I’m going to windbag out a long boring story’ face on again.

And sure enough, he does. “After all my murder suspects died, and I was forced to give up solving the crime as a lost cause, I decided I should make the best out of being dead. I started traveling the world, seeing and exploring places I never would have

considered going to when I was still alive. I walked through the beautiful museums and the cobbled side streets of Italy, I saw Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower, I explored the Egyptian Pyramids, I jumped over Niagara Falls, I even climbed to the top of Everest. It's amazing what not having a body can do for the soul."

I wonder if he's bluffing, but then I think, maybe not. He did have decades with nothing better to do, after all. Why not explore pyramids or climb Everest?

I think back to all the places I can say I've been, and I realize the list is pathetically short, just a few cities the circus has toured around.

I think back to all the epic things I can say I did, and the list is even shorter, if you don't count trapeze, that is.

"There were always the interesting dead types floating around too," added Victor, "When you could tell they were dead, that is."

Telling if someone else was dead could actually be fairly hard. Ghosts look pretty much just like any other living person to other ghosts, there's really no reliable way to tell they're dead unless you literally bump into them. Victor looks just like any other person to me, except for the fact that he's dressed up like a movie extra from 'Gone with the Wind'.

"And even when you could find another ghost, most of them only stuck around for a little while," says Victor, in a lower voice, as if he's now having a conversation with himself and I'm just eavesdropping, "A couple months for one, until she finally managed to get a message through to the kids... A year for another, until he finally got over his fear that he was doomed to hell... Five years for a third, until she was able to square away with leaving her husband behind... Everyone eventually moves on, I suppose..."

He trails off, looking down at the ground, the brim of his hat obscuring his eyes.

A moment later, he looks back up at me and says, “And, speaking of moving on, I believe we have a murder to solve, no?”

“Yep,” I say, walking through the trailer wall, “If you’re done with boring story time.”

“My stories aren’t boring,” protests Victor, waltzing through the wall after me.

“I think they’re as dry as your creepy British humor,” I say, looking around.

The inside of the trailer looks like what one might find in the wake of a hurricane. Shirts and jeans are draped over an unmade bed like modern grunge décor, and a pile of socks sits in the middle of the floor like they were trying to be some kind of monument. The whole place pretty much smells like Victor’s hat, which smells like dirty stray dogs.

A movement in one corner makes me jump, and I realize a moment later that it’s just Nash. I hadn’t even noticed him at first, he blended in so well with his natural environment of dead undies and jeans.

Nash is on his beat up old lap top, mashing angstily on his keyboard. Victor slides up behind him and looks over his shoulder to see what he’s writing.

“Looks like more poetry,” he says after a moment.

“Poetry?”

“Poetry,” says Victor, “He writes poetry all the time, actually. It’s not very good poetry; I wrote better pieces when I was four years old. But you have to give the wanker credit for trying.”

“I didn’t even know he was literate,” I say.

“Literate is a strong word,” says Victor, “Especially in this case.”

Nash stands up and walks over to a drawer, and Victor wastes no time taking command of the keyboard and inserting a few of his own special additions. And by that, I mean he added the word ‘wanker’ into a few lines.

By the time Nash plops back down in front of the computer screen with a freshly grabbed bag of Doritos, the deed has been done.

“Wow,” I say, “Just wow.”

“He’ll be so confused when he goes back and rereads what he wrote,” says Victor, giggling.

“You’re diabolical,” I say flatly.

“I try,” says Victor with a smile

“...So,” I say in attempt to get us back on track, “How is going through Nash’s trailer going to help us find out who killed me?”

Victor looks around. “Do you see any incriminating evidence? Like a can of Vaseline, perhaps? A murder weapon is always an excellent place to start.”

“No, but it’s hard to really see anything in here, I can’t even see the floor,” I say.

“Good point,” said Victor.

I pause, then it suddenly hits me. I say, “Wait a second. I really don’t think Nash could have done it.”

“Why not?” asks Victor.

“Well, whoever did it would have had to be able to reach the highest flyer bar,” I point out, “And Nash can’t do much of anything, let alone reach that bar.”

“Of course!” says Victor, putting a hand to his head, “Why didn’t I see that before? The murderer would have had to be able to use the other bars to swing up to the highest bar. They would have to be an acrobat.”

I think back to what Victor said about Trixie. She’s the only other acrobat here... but I still can’t drop that lingering feeling that she wouldn’t have killed me. She liked me, after all.

Unless...

Picture Trixie, beginning to realize I’m not interested in her.

Picture Sharkey, who sees the opportunity to not only catch Trixie on the rebound, but to get revenge on me.

Picture him, showing her the love I never did, playing on her hurt feelings, turning her against me.

Picture them, plotting my murder.

It all sort of makes sense... after all, they did start dating around three weeks ago, right around the time I died. Suspicious much?

“...Maybe you were right about Trixie,” I tell Victor, “But I still don’t think she would have done it on her own. Maybe Sharkey put her up to it.”

“I believe you underestimate her,” says Victor, “I, for one, think she’s perfectly capable of murdering on her own. But, I suppose a collaboration between her and Sharkey is perfectly possible as well.”

“Let’s search her trailer next,” I suggest.

“Excellent idea, sir,” says Victor, walking out through a grimy poster on the wall, as if it’s some kind of doorway. I follow him through, blinking in the sunlight on the other side.

“So,” I say as we walk toward Trixie’s trailer, “If you’ve traveled the world and all that stuff, and could be anywhere else right now if you wanted to, why are you hanging around this circus? Climbing mountains and jumping waterfalls get boring for you, or something?”

“Not at all,” says Victor, brushing his hair out of his left eye, “I just enjoy the circus. I always have, ever since I saw one when I was a boy. Ever since my death, besides exploring the wonders of the world, I’ve also haunted a number of circuses.”

He smiles to himself. “Ah, I’d say the best one was the circus run by P.T. Barnum, back in the eighteen hundreds. The one with that Fiji mermaid, and Jumbo the elephant... Oh! And General Tom Thumb, one can’t forget about him. Not to mention they had simply stunning acrobats. And the part where they shot people out of cannons... simply spectacular, that was always my favorite part. Yes, I haunted that one for years, I loved it so much.”

“I could get shot out of a cannon,” I say, “If I wanted to. But I’d rather just stick to trapeze. That’s where the real epic is.”

Victor snorts. “I could do trapeze with my eyes closed. Getting shot from a cannon at a hundred and eighty miles an hour, and having to angle yourself so you hit the net just right, now that takes guts.”

“Yeah, because getting shot into a net really requires a lot of brains,” I say.

We reach the door to Trixie’s trailer. You can tell it’s hers because it has a big pink star on the front with her name slapped across it.

I step inside, Victor close on my heels. The room is dark, Trixie still flaunting herself around under the big top. Victor focuses his

energy and flicks the light switch, and suddenly it's like we've been transported into Barbie's dream house. Everything is pink. It's so pink that it's hard to tell where the pink floofy pink floor rug ends and where the pink walls and the pink puffy bed begin. There's a mirror on one wall, and another on the opposite wall, and together they create a sort of tunnel effect, duplicating me and Victor over and over again. The two of us, trapped a million times over in the same rosy purgatory.

"Ouch, my eyes," I say.

"You get used to it, if you stay in here long enough," says Victor, his hand accentuating each syllable with up and down and twisting motions.

"How do you know, do you come in here often?"

"Possibly."

"Disturbing..." I say. After a moment, I add, "How are we supposed to find evidence in here anyway?"

"Look for something that's not pink?" suggests Victor.

"If she did lube up the bar, she probably would have done it with something pink," I say, "Like a bottle of strawberry shampoo or cherry hand soap, maybe."

"Those, sir, are red," points out Victor.

"Whatever," I say. I get down on my hands and knees, and poke my head through the painfully pink drawers, only to find more mostly pink clothes. Of course.

Victor, since he's a lot better at making himself tangible than I am, just pulls open a drawer and starts sifting through her short skirts and skimpy shirts.

I pull my head out of Trixie's dresser, straightening up to stand next to Victor.

If someone walked in right now, it'd look like all this pink was just flopping around on its own, like so many fuzzy salmon trying to writhe their way out of the depths of Trixie's drawer.

Pretty soon, all the clothes in her drawers have been displaced, and nothing's turned up.

"Okay, so maybe she got rid of the murder weapon," I say, "But we might be able to find other evidence, like on her computer, in an incriminating e-mail or something."

"Well, you're in luck, I happen to know everyone's computer passwords," says Victor proudly.

"Of course you do," say, "That's pretty much assumed. What's Trixie's password?"

"Pink," says Victor matter-of-factly.

There's a real shocker.

Victor opens the screen and enters the password. Then he looks at me, like he's waiting for me to start break dancing or break out some show tunes or something.

"What?" I say.

"...Sir, what is an eee-may-el, exactly?" he asks.

I face palm. "You don't know?"

"There are some things I have yet to grasp about modern society, all right?" says Victor, "Such as the *eye* pod, the *eye* phone, the twitter, the face book, and this eee-may-el thing."

I then spend the next twenty minutes talking Victor through infiltrating Trixie's e-mail. Luckily her password for her Hotmail is also 'pink'. I've never understood why people use the same password for everything, it makes it so much easier for hackers like me and Victor to invade their privacy. The only thing better is when people's password is 'password'.

As we browse the earlier contents of her sent box, looking for some kind of hint at an impending murder plot, my mind mulls over the possibility that Trixie killed me.

Or fact, rather.

I mean, the thing is that Trixie really had to have been involved, since she's the only one who could have reached the bar.

I absentmindedly gaze at the screen full of Trixie's old opened e-mails, lost in thought. They have so much chatspeak in them, it looks like each one is a giant jumble of letters and censored bad words. My mind manages to pick out a phrase here and there, but mostly it's all just lost in transit from my eyes to my brain.

"...mEt me @ bar 2nite @ 7..."

"...brb, left chicken soup N microwave..."

But the thing that gets me, now that I think about it, is she hadn't really acted like a murderer. I remember seeing her face as I fell, and she looked genuinely shocked. And then after I'd died, I'd seen her crying. This much could have been just an act to appear innocent, or even some kind of attention seeking thing, except she cried with no one else around.

"...can't go 2 party sat., got 2 pract. 4 next act..."

Was it remorse for murdering me, or just sadness at losing me?

“... & i wuz all lyke, get outta my face bitch...”

And her dating Sharkey, was it a result of them teaming up to do me in, or just because he was there to comfort her when she needed it most?

“...u watch that last epEsod of J.S?1!? Mike The Situashun totalE pwned...”

But there was that inescapable fact again... who else could have possibly reached the bar?

“...i'm so gud at back hand springz, i culd tily do them with my eyes cloz'd...”

And as that e-mail forces its way through my thoughts, I suddenly get another one of those epiphanies, and just like that, another possibility reveals itself. Maybe Trixie wasn't the only one after all.

Victor's earlier jibe rings through my ears.

I could do trapeze with my eyes closed.

At the time, I assumed it was just him being hypothetical. But what if he really could do trapeze? He'd been hanging around circuses for hundreds of years, not to mention he's a pro at making himself substantial. Why wouldn't he be able to?

But why would he want to kill me? And if he'd done it, why the heck was he pretending to help me solve the murder he'd committed?

I look over at him as he continues to trawl through Trixie's personal life, and decide to catch him off guard. I go for the good old 'direct question' technique.

“Victor,” I say, “Did you kill me?”

Victor looks over at me, and the deer-in-headlights expression on his face is enough to tell me I'm on to something.

"You did kill me, didn't you?!" I exclaim.

"...Why would you think a thing like that?" he asks after a moment, fiddling with his hat as if attempting to regain composure.

"Because you said you could do trapeze with your eyes closed!" I say, pointing at him with an accusatory index finger, "Also because of your face just now."

Victor pulls his hat down over his eyes. "I didn't really mean I could do trapeze!"

I yank the hat right off his head, holding it as high as I can in the air. "I know you did it, just fess up already!"

"Give me back my hat!" cries Victor, flailing at it.

"No!" I say, waving the hat tauntingly, "Not until you tell the truth!"

He jumps for it, but I hold him back with one hand. It's pretty easy, since he's such a scrawny fail.

"I plead the fifth!" he cries.

"I swear, if you don't confess, the hat's going to get it! And you won't be able to buy another one either, because you're dead!"

Victor seems to deflate like one of those inflatable plastic tube dancers, the ones you see outside used car dealerships, after someone nails it with a BB gun.

"All right, all right!" he cries. He squeaks, in barely a whisper, "...I did it. I flipped up there the night before the

rehearsal and coated the fly bar with Herbal Essences Hydralicious Reconditioning Shampoo...”

“I knew it!” I say, “Did you seriously get so bored that you started offing people just for shits and giggles?”

Victor’s expression changes. His eyebrows furrow in and up over his suddenly overly-shiny dark eyes. The expression looks so foreign on his face that it takes me a moment to figure out the emotion. Then I realize it looks a lot like sorrow. Well, that’s a new one for him.

“No!” cries Victor, “It’s not like that! I didn’t kill you for fun! I did it because I was lonely...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“I was all alone,” says Victor, looking at the ground, unable to meet my gaze, “I told you before, since I couldn’t solve my murder in time, I’m stuck here forever. All the ghosts I ever met ended up moving on... after all those years, I never found anyone who was trapped here like I was. I’m sure there are some souls out there, somewhere, like me... But even after hundreds of years, I’ve never run across any...”

He bites his lip. “Every time I met someone else who was dead, it was always bittersweet, because I knew they’d leave eventually. They all did. Traveling around and seeing things helped stave off the solitary a little, but it would always creep back whenever I realized that I’d have nobody to talk to about the places I’d gone. And, even worse, sometimes it felt like I’d never even been there at all, because there was nobody else who could say I had... if that makes any sense.”

“Most of what you say never makes sense,” I say, “And that’s no excuse to kill someone, couldn’t you just wait for someone to croak the old fashioned way if you were that desperate for someone to talk to?”

“I told you, if I did that, they’d just move on,” says Victor, a note of desperation entering his voice, like he wants more than anything for me to understand, “I... I suppose what I really wanted was for someone to be stuck here like me. I thought that if I was the one that murdered you, you wouldn’t be able to figure it out. And I thought that if I pretended to help you look for the murderer, then that would throw you even more off the trail... and if you never solved the murder...”

He trails off, then says, “...It’s never the one you least suspect in murder mysteries. It’s the one who isn’t a suspect at all...”

“Misery loves company, doesn’t it?” I say.

His hands are limp at his sides. “I know it was wrong! Eternity in purgatory isn’t something you should force on anyone... I realized that after I’d already killed you.”

“No shit,” I say, “Why did it have to be me anyway? Why not Trixie? At least she’s a girl. With a girl this whole ‘murder and hoard for all eternity’ thing wouldn’t be nearly as creepy.”

“You seemed like a better traveling companion,” says Victor, “Trixie’s too dramatic. Sharkey’s too violent. Nash breathes too loudly. The bearded lady has too much beard...”

Well, at least the guy has good taste. You have to give him that much.

Victor meets my eyes again, his expression pleading. “I’m... I’m sorry, Jacob.”

“Don’t you mean ‘sir’?”

“I do know your name, you know.”

Ha. I knew he did all along.

The sad part is, I know what the next step is. I've solved the murder, and now comes the part where I need to 'bring him to justice'.

But how would I get revenge on him anyway? I can't kill him back, he's already dead. I can't toss him in jail and throw away the key, he can walk through walls and bars.

I suppose I could punch him a couple hundred times.

But really I can't.

The truth is, even though it totally pisses me off that he just went and killed me like that, I realize I can't bring myself to hurt him in return. Hey, I'm not completely heartless. And I guess I can see why he'd get desperate enough to do in someone as cool as me. Everyone wants a piece, after all. Just ask Trixie, she knows.

And it's not as if I really left that much behind, besides a handful of Facebook friends and a family who, in all honesty, probably hasn't even noticed I'm dead yet. Truth be told, there's only three things I really miss about being alive.

Eating food.

Sitting in chairs without my butt falling through them.

Being able to do trapeze.

So Victor definitely owes me for those. I might as well keep him around, I realize, because he really does seem sorry, and he really does seem to like having me around. That means he'll try all the harder to gain my forgiveness, and trust me, if I'm stuck for all eternity with him, I'll make sure he works good and hard for it. God, I'm starting to sound more conniving than him now.

Victor's still looking like he's bracing for me to smash him over the head with something, so I say, all angry-like, "You know what happens now?"

"What?" squeaks Victor, eyes widening.

I pull my arm back, and Victor squeezes his eyes shut. But all I do is set his hat back over his ruffled up hair. He opens one eye, looking lost.

"You're going to teach me how to go substantial as good as you can, that's what," I say, "If I can't move on, I at least want to be able to do trapeze again. And I guess that'll be just as good."

Victor's expression is surprise, then quickly morphs into hope. "You mean you forgive me?"

"Forgiveness is a strong word," I say, "Especially in this case."

Victor looks crestfallen.

"But helping me out will get you a little closer, I guess."

He looks a little happier. "Then help you I shall."

"And after that, you're taking me to see Caesar's Palace, the Statue of Liberty, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, that Red-Light District in Germany, those people getting shoved into subway trains in Tokyo, and all those other cool things people want to see in real life but only ever see on YouTube, got it?"

Victor smiles. "I haven't the foggiest idea what this 'you' tube is, but that sounds like a plan."

And with that, we step out of the pink depths of Trixie's trailer, traipsing our way through dusty curtains of sunlight, back toward the cloaked kaleidoscope that is the big top.

The two of us, lurking between worlds, haunting tourist hot spots and notable go-to places across the globe.

That blur next to your Uncle Billy's head that turned up in last year's Hawaii trip photo? It could be that your photo developer is a clueless noob and messed up your memento. But it might also be me and Victor, photo bombing.

Those doors slamming all night long during your vacation at that ritzy hotel? It could be someone's annoying children in need of some serious Nanny 911. But it might also be Victor and I, making sure you get the most out of your stay by not snoring it away.

That trapeze bar at the circus that you could have sworn just moved by itself? Well, that one was definitely me.

Me and Victor, we're just another ghost story.

Jordan Harris

Jordan Harris



Junior Voice Performance Major

Jordan Harris is a transfer junior studying opera here at Michigan. Beyond classical music, he has deep roots in soul, jazz and musical theatre. Though he's been singing for years, he's been writing for even longer and he's excited (and nervous) to have this chance to share his works. Praise goes out to his loving friends and supportive family without whom he would cease to exist.

Awaking

i write melodies in my dreams.

lavender ballads composed of mirth
and miracle, symphonies and sonatas
cancelled come the cold morning light.

in my sleep, i create unmarred
unblemished immaculate wonder.

in my waking: only ethereal
mistakes, mistakes...

Mistakes,
The grandest of which
(I'm reminded)
Is waking up next to you.

Sphere With Colour

After the sculpture by Barbara Hepworth

you may look at Me
and see a Sphere with Holes.
a China doll ripped and
bloodied by a Spew of
Off target bullets, the potential of perfect
misfortuned by error.
but if you Look closer
you'll see the holes
have been filled
with color.
I've done this myself, you see,
smooth crafted chimerical defects
to make the sun think
She can just Walk right through me.

(he came at me
steely and allegro
and me, as porcelain as i could be
but i wouldn't break.
i said to him 'what chance have you
if the sun won't get through?'
maybe that's not what i said
but i wish i had)

I Should be angry,
but I'm not.
I Feel pretty,
Dinged and Battered I may be,
but at least
There's color now.
Don't you see?
the Sun Gives us color

So she knows to go Around us.

so when You look at Me
Don't see a sphere with holes
There are no Holes
And there is no Sphere
My Shape has yet to be defined

I think what I need is a sharpener
A good one, with a strong metal frame
I'll come to him, flat and new and insecure
and when I let myself inside
he'll twist and turn and tear away
the parts that do not work

He'll grind me down, sharpen me up
Catch all the little pieces
That would otherwise fall
To cold linoleum floor
He will hold my strength
so that I might be vulnerable again

Others will wish to use me,
twirl me between their fingers,
jiggle me so to expose my rubbery nature

Poets, they will laugh
for my wishes are far from poetic
and mother, she will surely frown,
out of sadness more than shame

But what right have they?
Who among us
knows perfection in Love?
So together, we'll continue on
Til' my lead is gone and my writing is up

Til' there's nothing left
save a small and tender ball
with no purpose but to remove
these silly remarks my life has made

Elise Huerta

Elise Huerta



Elise Huerta is a sophomore majoring in Asian Languages and Cultures. She is from Ann Arbor, studies Mandarin, and loves to run and write.

Guidance

coach says, *man up*.
says you don't cry after you lose a soccer game.
but you don't get pissed either—you just
suck up the defeat and work harder next time.
he says it's called composure. (Mom says
don't use the word piss; it sounds crass).

dad says don't speak too softly or pull that
weak-handshake shit. Says no one's going to
hire that kind of woman.
older sister says: when you're 18, don't still be a virgin.
sex-ed teacher says don't not be a virgin.
friend says you're too slut when you let your thong show like that.
boy says you're too feminist. says *relax*,
no one listens to the lyrics.

cereal box says—more grains, less you!
professor says, *fuck that*.
teacher says don't use the word fuck;
it sounds crass.
friend says, it's okay to own a vibrator
as long as you keep it hidden.
older sister says it's okay to be a lesbian,
just don't tell mom & dad.
BMI says you're too fat.

advertisement says: you can become a virgin
again with hymen-reconstruction surgery!
friend says can you believe she's a stripper?
says strippers are low-class; boy
says strippers are hot friend says never
underestimate the erotic power of wearing
your hair down boyfriend says too much cleavage

looks tacky, you know, mom says you don't have to
take everything so seriously, you know,
roommate says grow some balls and kill the damn
spider yourself.

mom says this is how you become a professor,
and not a prostitute.
Kanye West says—what's the difference?

Habit

*damn adolescents
lighting up on the front porch again
in broad daylight like
they own this Saturday
morning.*

the clicking is the friction
between Jordan's middle finger
and thumb.
it's a habit but not

a bad one: people have
all kinds of habits be it
cheek-biting,
hair-twisting,
knuckle-cracking; it's just

that some are more
audible than others, and some
are more likely to make someone mutter
should-know-better.

Jordan's oddly proportioned beneath
his jeans and cigarette-smoke sweatshirt.
he's got stilts for legs
he's got so much leg inside that denim,
you wouldn't believe
what he's been hiding in there
you wouldn't believe he burnt his left thigh

with a cigarette once
it was on accident kind of
it was experimental kind of
it was the kind of thing he'd reflect

back on and say, can't even self-mutilate as proficiently as my peers
it was the kind of thing you'd expect

*from those damn artists
they do those kinds of self-destructive things
they've got nothing better to do when they're
finished writing poems like
they own this language.*

Jordan's got X-ray blue eyes
he's got blade-like irises;
he owns those irises and by extension
the waves of light cartwheeling
around inside them

Jordan's got malleable senses
he's got cotton growing on the roof of his mouth
Jordan owns the front porch and by extension the splinter
lodged in the ball of some stranger's foot

Jordan owns the seven dollar
pack of Parliaments, he paid for it with the credit card
that he also owns, it's got his name on it;
he even asked them to print a receipt
so that he knows he owns the credit card.
and by extension the cigarettes.
the hazy cloud of exhale.

Stranger

perhaps it was not my place to be
eavesdropping
but it was a public

library and for Chrissake did she have to speak quite so loudly
when I was trying to focus?

did she have to be so boisterous and overweight and laugh
cacophonously when someone on the

other line
said *fucking losers*

I thought about saying:
shut the hell up; this is a library,
can't you see I'm trying to read

something of consequence?

in a more likely scenario, it would've come out as
Excuse me,

would you mind speaking just a little bit quieter?
maybe with an accompanying eye roll, if it even

came out at all,
which it so rarely does,
and she would've said
bitch
and I would've taken it to heart:

would've thought *bitch*
at every nearly spiteful

idea that materialized in my mind for a week,
even if it never
manifested itself into

some sad reality

Rain Falls and I Imagine Our Palms

You and I, we exist on the same plane.
when I say that you are Dustin Hoffman in the swimming pool
and you reply by saying that I am Owl Eyes in the library,
this makes sense to both of us.

Fact: every person possesses a memory in which they are unequivocally
and unforgivably humiliated.

Goddess, you promise me. blonde-haloed, blue-eyed goddess.
perhaps this is the fourth time I've heard the story about how
Jacklyn Spade made fun of you for being short in seventh grade.
about how the laughter crawled underneath your fingernails
and infected you. how the scars lasted longer than they should have,
than you wanted them to.

we are not either of us especially social, or competent, or socially
competent.

our words keep getting lost in each other like a choir I have never been
sure of anything besides this black hole of confessions; I hope to slip
my secret somewhere convenient and not awkward I would like to be
honest: to shed our fear like snake skin

I have never kept a secret

I am kept within boundaries I rarely speak with real people like you
and the rain

falls and I imagine the puddles of our thoughts and the way they keep
twisting into entropy: you're so X-ray, so articulate it embarrasses me
not that language is any kind of stranger but just that I'm not so
quick-thinking
not so quick to anything but the cold
is unforgiving the storm unrelenting like the pressure in my stomach
when many people speak at once—

these boundaries
feel imaginary.
the embarrassment
is no stronger than the fear it was built with.
I need to disappear
with someone who is tangible
I am bound
by the ropes of these expectations.
why do I even bother
speaking?

the syllables are an illusion.
I am not certain that they improve anything—
why did I ever think words could tell anyone anything
about the rain that
slipped through the cracks in our fingers?
about how much bravery it takes to remember.
about how we became smaller in the midst of saber-toothed lightning
and rolling thunder,
about how our palms were glowing—
about how we said our secrets out loud,
watched them disappear into darkness.

but first let them flash out for a moment.
leave imprints on the sky.

like lightning.

Josh Kim

Josh Kim



Junior, majoring in English and RC Creative Writing, with a minor in writing through the Sweetland Center for Writing

Josh is currently an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, studying creative writing through the university's Residential College, and English through the College of Literature, Science, and Arts where he is hoping to complete an honors thesis next year. He is training to be a peer tutor through the university's Sweetland Center for Writing, which is quickly becoming a second home to him. Academically, Josh's interests include narrative fiction, postmodern and feminist literary criticism and theory, medieval romances, the Arthurian legend, writing center theory and pedagogy, and southern literature. He one day hopes to be a professor of English and composition.

Destinations

“So, what’s your name?”

“Steven,” I said.

“Steven what?”

“Steven Stevenson.”

“Bullshit,” he said. He and his friends look at me like I’d just killed a puppy.

“I’m serious.”

“You expect me to believe that?” I pull out my driver’s license and hand it to him. His reaction was not uncommon.

“No fucking way,” he says to himself. He hands back my card and asked me where I was going.

“Friend’s party on the south side.”

“Us too, maybe it’s the same one.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, breaking eye contact. When the bus comes to a stop, I get off and walk. Yes, there’s a party, and yes, my friend is throwing it, but something about the night has struck me, and it tells me to walk north.

I make my way toward wherever it is I’m going, wondering why I just took a forty-minute bus ride into the city, only to run away from the reason I came. A cool, fall breeze blows and a light mist brushes over my skin. As I walk the streets filled with all sorts of people: obnoxiously loud teenagers trying to prove their rebelliousness, couples going through the dinner-and-a-movie motions of first dates, overstressed businessmen quickly walking to their cars. It’s raining, but barely. Everyone seems to be heading the opposite direction. Maybe I should go to this party after all. But it’s not even an important one, like a birthday or something - just another drunken orgy of drumbeats

and sweat-drenched bodies, huddled against each other like cows. I'm not missing much, and no one's going to remember if I was there or not anyway. With every block I cross I find myself more alone.

The rain is falling a little harder now— not quite enough to require an umbrella, but it makes me want one. I like the way the sheen of wetness makes the black asphalt of the road shine; it's almost like a river: deep, mysterious, tantalizing, tempting me to test its depths. I dip my left foot in the street. Still pavement, but for a moment, I believed. I get the urge to cross to the other side of the deserted road, now armed with the knowledge that the street won't sweep me away. I look left, then right. The street's clear of traffic, but I go over to the crosswalk, click the little metal button, and wait for the bright, red hand to change anyway.

On my way across the street, I splash in a little puddle that's collected next to the curb and like a duckling. What would it be like to be a duck? Would a duck have gone to the party? Probably not. But that would have been a riot, wouldn't it? If I were a duck, and had I gone to the party, I probably would've been the talk of the night. But I'm not, and I didn't, so here I am. I reach the curb and light a cigarette. Two left, I should buy more. I hope there's a liquor store around here somewhere.

It's been a while since I've seen another person. It's lonely out here. My hand makes its way inside my pocket and gently caresses my phone. Maybe I should call and tell them I'm going to be late. No, I don't want to lie. And if I say I'm going to be late, I'll have to turn around and go. Maybe I should call and tell them I'm not coming. No, then they'll try to convince me. But I really should tell them. I take out my phone and dial the number, leaving even more fingerprints on the greasy touchpad display. The phone rings five times and then goes to voicemail. That was much easier than I thought I was going to be. It's still a little lonely out here, but the solitude is nice. In this vast, dark metropolis, with only the electric glow of neon signs and half-lit street lamps lighting my way, I feel all-

powerful, like the whole city belongs to me and me alone. I turn the corner and hope to see a liquor store, or a 7/11, or anywhere that would sell me a pack of cigarettes. No dice. The only thing I see is an old-timey diner. A milkshake will have to do.

A homely girl named Pam seats me. She's probably 19, but looks like a 29 year old who's had it rough, like she's had at least a few kids on her own and an abusive boyfriend or two. Her lipstick is bright, pinky carmine, which looks terrible against her pale skin and bleached-blonde-to-shit hair. She seems tired, but she's sweet; her demeanor is cheerful as she goes back behind the counter and fetches my complimentary water and silverware. The place is exactly what you'd expect a rundown diner to be: frightening, bearded men in the corner booths wearing trucker hats and drinking coffee; once white walls now marred with all manner of crayon, egg, and God knows what else. Pam sets my water down on the table and slides napkin-wrapped utensils toward me.

"What can I get you?" she asks. I should be staring at the menu, but I can't look at anything other than the bags under her eyes.

"What kind of milkshakes you got?" I finally ask.

"They're all on the back." I flip the menu over to look at my options. The list is staggering; the sheer number of options that lay before me takes up the entire backside. How exactly does one make a cola flavored milkshake?

"Why don't I give you a few minutes to decide?" says Pam, sensing my indecisiveness. I must've been making a face.

"Sure. That'd be great. Thanks." She leaves as I stare at the battered old tri-fold menu with the scratched, grimy plastic. I take a sip of my water; it tastes like one of those old Flintstones vitamins. I prefer the rain. I push the glass to the other side of the table, and a little bit of water sloshes up over the rim. Oh well, that's what napkins are for, I guess. I give up on the milkshakes for a moment and instead

check out the food. It's standard diner fare: eggs, omelets, pancakes, corned beef hash. I'm not impressed. I go back to the milkshake page. Shit, Pam's coming back and I still don't know what I want.

"Is the root beer milkshake like a root beer float?" I ask.

"No, it's a milkshake that tastes just like root beer."

"How?"

"I don't know," she admits

"Is it fizzy?"

"No. It's a milkshake."

"If it's not fizzy, then it can't taste like root beer."

"Well, it does. I don't know how they do it." She's getting annoyed with me, I think.

"I'll have the pumpkin milkshake." I say.

"We're out of pumpkin."

Dammit. I ask for the pecan pie one instead.

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Just the milkshake."

She tells me it'll take a few minutes, walks off with my order, and hands it to the cook before making a fresh batch of coffee. I don't like pecan pie, but I'm curious how they make these crazy drinks. I pull another cigarette out of my pocket and light up. I don't see a no-smoking sign anywhere, but I suck it down fast, just in case I've missed one somewhere and Pam comes over, telling me put it out. I check my phone to make sure I haven't missed any calls. Nope. Nothing. I wonder how the party's going. I wonder if that guy from the bus and his friends really were going to the same place. I wonder if anyone

notices I'm not there. A bit of graffiti on the wall catches me eye. *You're all a bunch of sheep*, it says. Someone else has drawn a giant penis around the quote in blue ink that looks like someone tried to wash it away, half-heartedly. As I stare and ponder the erect cock and the wisdom it envelops, Pam delivers my shake.

"Enjoy."

"Thanks." I take a sip. It tastes just like pecan pie. Jesus, how in the world do they do that? The taste of the tobacco lingers on my tongue and in between my teeth, on my gums. It mingles with the sticky sweetness and caramelized crunch of the mysterious dairy treat. God, I hate pecan pie. I finish half my drink and ask for the bill. The total comes to \$4.29. I set a ten on the table and leave. I feel bad for Pam, for her life that I'd imagined for her, and for giving her such a hard time about the root beer.

It's pouring now. I run around the empty streets, looking for a bus shelter or anything to keep me dry. I'm tired and I want to go home. No luck, no matter what street I turn down. I go left; I go right; I have no idea where I am. The only thing I see are streetlights and buildings with dark interiors. I turn left at the next corner and run down a few more blocks. A warm glow two streets to my right catches my eye, and I follow it. Goddammit, I'm back at the diner. How did that happen? I enter the place, soaking wet. Pam greets me at the door. I hope she doesn't say anything about the tip.

"Where would the nearest bus stop be?" I ask.

"Walk two blocks straight ahead, take a right, and then keep going for another three blocks or so."

"Thanks." I start to leave, but she stops me.

"You forgot your change." Why would she do that? Is it not obvious that I was doing her a kindness? Desperate people aren't supposed to be this honest.

“Thanks,” I echo myself, and take the change. She goes back behind the counter and busies herself with whatever it is waitresses do back there. I leave two dollars on the nearest table and run. She should’ve taken my tip the first time.

The bus stop is just where Pam said it would be. And wouldn’t you know it, it’s right in front of a convenience store. I want to go in to buy another pack, but the route map on the outside of the shelter says my bus will be coming any minute.

“STEVEN STEVENSON!” I hear in the distance. It’s the same assholes from the bus. I can’t believe my luck, or rather lack of it. They come up to me and wait in the shelter. “HOW WAS THAT PARTY, MAN? KILLER, WASN’T IT?” I can smell his last drink on his breath.

“Yeah, crazy shit.” I take the last cigarette out of my pocket and light it.

“Lots of fine ladies, eh?”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Pssh, what, you gay or something?”

“Yeah, that must be it.” He laughs.

“You’re funny, you know that?” I was unaware. I give him a nod and a fake smile as my bus pulls up.

“Hey man, you’re completely soaked.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I say.

He chuckles. “There you go again, being funny.” This is bad luck after all. The bus pulls up to the stop, and I’m surprised I’m the only one boarding. He motions to say goodbye, but it’s too late, I’m on the bus, the doors have closed, and I’m paying my fare.

“Good evening,” the bus driver greets me. The words strike my ear funny; I can’t decide if what she’s said is true or not. As the diesel-fueled behemoth carries me off into the night, I can’t help but think maybe I should’ve gone to the party after all.

Jacqui Sahagian

Jacqui Sahagian



Jacqui Sahagian is an English major from Concord, Michigan. Her favorite book is *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Her favorite poems are "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens. After graduation Jacqui hopes to avoid graduate school at all costs, move to the Appalachians and become a mountain woman.

Twins

“Don’t tap it against the ashtray like that. See, it comes unpacked here.” Kale pointed out the dents in the side of the Marlboro Menthol he’d given to his sister. “Just tap on it with your finger like this. Or flick it with your thumb. Some people call it ‘flicking the cherry,’ but that just makes me uncomfortable.”

By some people, you mean the meth-mouth white-trash brats you hang around now, Colleen thought, squirming on the sticky red vinyl of the diner booth. A pubescent girl gyrated on the flat screen TV on the opposite wall, pop music video on mute. Kale was teaching Colleen to smoke. This introduced a new dynamic in their relationship because previously Colleen had taught him everything. She was older, after all, and the age gap was bigger than the mathematical reality of one year and twenty-two days. Now she felt like his child as he taught, as if Kale knew all and she knew nothing, and she liked it, even though it made her feel inferior.

Kale taught Colleen to place the cigarette slightly to one side of her bow-shaped lips, because if you put it in the center, you look like you don’t know what you’re doing. She’d quit letting him light cigarettes for her because she thought it made her look dumb, and though he said buddy lights were more intimate, she used her own lighter. Kale told her how to judge someone by the brand they smoked. Boring sluts smoke Marlboro Lights. Hipsters smoke American Spirits because they’re organic. Black men and slutty white girls who want to sleep with black men smoke Newports. Badasses smoke Lucky Strikes. Colleen became obsessed with watching people smoke, especially since, on her healthy college campus, smokers were ostracized for being a public health risk and polluting the environment.

The fat, slouching waitress came to refill Kale’s coffee and bring Colleen more hot water for her tea. “Thank you, Chelsea,” Kale said loudly, so that everyone in the establishment would know he was in with the staff. Chelsea looked at them with suspicious curiosity. New weird girl in the diner. Chelsea was probably trying to figure out if

they were related or if they were dating. That was generally what that expression meant. Kale and Colleen had a vague physical similarity which hinted they were siblings, but were also physically affectionate, communicating through hand squeezes and eye contact, which made it difficult to read their relationship. The two wouldn't have looked anything alike if they didn't have the same attitude about beauty. Kale was a full foot taller than Colleen, Colleen had brown eyes and Kale had blue ones, but since they dyed their hair black and shared oversized black T-shirts advertising punk bands, strangers could sometimes guess they were siblings. They avoided the sun like the plague, which was reflected in their milky white pallor, and ate little. They often ruminated on the attractiveness of a fully visible rib cage and egged each other on in their efforts to look like skeletons. Every pants size dropped triggered a celebration and a challenge to the other.

Kale had never actively taught Colleen anything before. Knowledge wasn't gold to him as it was to her, and he thought Colleen was smarter than he was anyway, or at least not interested in learning the kinds of things he might know that she didn't. He was better at painting and drawing than she was, but he never endeavored to teach her. Just encouraged her, bought her art supplies for Christmas, painted his grotesque cartoonish ravens and skeletons sitting across from her, but never taught her. Kale used various mixtures of thick black, white, and red oil paints, and Colleen's still lifes paled in comparison to his abstract horrors that bled before her. She'd taught him to play guitar, drilling each chord, offering the perfect tidbit of advice when he got stuck, but that was forever ago. Now Kale was better than Colleen at guitar too. She told him all about different musical and literary movements—the punks, the Beats, the Lost Generation in Paris—and he retained some of those facts through sheer repetition rather than interest. She taught him to write poetry simply by forcing him to do it. He hadn't beaten her at that yet, but although she'd recently won some money for a poem she'd written, she was sure her brother would soon outstrip her in that area, too.

They offered each other the art they created like presents, and each time he outdid her all she could do was scoff and snarl, “Remember, if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even know who Sid Vicious is.”

Colleen had given him all the artists she loved like gifts too, so Kale was better than Colleen at everything, but she had a bigger impact on his life than he had on hers. There was no way to tell what he’d be like without her, while she’d more or less be the same, and she saw this as another defeat. Colleen would’ve still been an artist if he hadn’t been born, as their parents hadn’t intended on him being born. He couldn’t say the same. He had no way to conceive what his life would be like without her, although such a life was peeking out from around corners since she’d abandoned him to go to the university.

All the employees at Denny’s appeared to know her brother intimately. The hostess gave them his favorite booth in the smoking section, knowing already that he’d be expecting more people. The waitress, Chelsea, only asked for Colleen’s order and automatically brought Kale coffee and buffalo chicken wraps with extra sauce. He put two regular sugars, one sweet-and-low, and a generous helping of cream into his coffee while she drank her tea black. Colleen had already been dumb enough on one occasion to ask for soymilk; the waitress looked at her as if she had just attempted to order in a different language, and Kale nearly shot coffee out his nose with laughter. He thought the incident was cute, but she would never ask for anything not on the menu again.

Colleen thought Denny’s was one of the most depressing places the youth of their hometown could choose to spend their time. The waitresses stank of prescription drugs, trailer parks, and terminated pregnancies. There was nothing on the menu Colleen would allow herself to eat. The place was too strongly air conditioned and had violent florescent lighting, but you could smoke there. That was all that mattered. The only other thing young people in their blue-collar town could do for fun was loiter in Walmart or brew methamphetamines. Their hometown was predominantly working class, if you were lucky enough to even have a job, and recent declines in the economy had ravaged the small city. There were as many

abandoned businesses as there were operating ones, but still many people who'd been born there never left—including their parents.

Their parents were hicks, but Colleen hadn't learned to hate that about them until after the divorce. They split up when she was ten and Kale was nine. The worst thing about it was realizing she'd been too dumb to see it coming. The family never had any money to begin with, so the drop to relying on a single income destroyed the slight degree of stability their parents had been able to provide. Growing up, Colleen had hero-worshipped their father, while Kale was closer to their mom. Their dad was an artist, a writer, and a musician, but was also angry and melancholy, prone to mood swings and alcohol abuse. All his faults that Colleen had been too young to see surfaced in the wake of the split. After the divorce, he took a job that required him to spend six months of the year installing security systems at research bases in Antarctica, and the other six months unemployed in the States, living in a four-hundred-dollar-a-month hotel room. The job doubled as an escape from all responsibility related to his children. When he moved out, Colleen, Kale, and their mother couldn't afford to stay in their house, which began their period of drifting. They moved ten times in the next eight years, but their living situation had stabilized some after Colleen left for college. Their mother still worked sixty hours a week between two minimum-wage jobs, and they still lived in a dilapidated basement apartment in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the dying city, but one fewer mouth to feed eased the financial burden, and they hadn't moved for the two years Colleen had been at school.

The city where Colleen went to college was only forty minutes from where she and Kale grew up, but it might as well have been the opposite side of the earth. The college town was prosperous and thriving on the money brought to it by overpaid professors and wealthy out-of-state students; a fake utopia of the Midwest. People there renovated unique, old houses and filled them with expensive art and tastefully ironic kitsch. Adults and students held public protests against war, education cuts, and pollution. Wealthy ex-hippies who liked to pretend they were still radical grocery shopped at Whole

Foods and sent their kids to prestigious public schools with lovely facilities. They hung out and drank sustainable coffee in cafes, used book stores, and ethnic food restaurants. There were no cafes, book stores, or ethnic food restaurants in Colleen and Kale's hometown. But you could get unlimited coffee for two dollars at Denny's, which at least attracted some business from the adjacent highway and by being open twenty-four hours.

Kale's friends trickled in and out of the diner—they knew to look for him here—while Colleen smoked and plunged her tea bag in and out of the hot water. She said hello to everyone, if they hadn't met her before they knew her by reputation, and listened to the conversations, but didn't feel she had anything to say that wouldn't be a thinly veiled insult. She watched Kale interact with the others through a curtain of smoke. Unlike her archaic heroes from old films—James Dean, Rita Hayworth, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall—he didn't look sexy with a cigarette. Maybe it was the glow of black and white in the movies, maybe the lack of smell, but she thought it made her own flesh and blood sitting before her look strange. People Colleen knew and didn't know came and went, and she observed the new phrases and facial expressions Kale used when interacting with them. He'd picked up a few annoying catch-phrases, including calling anything he liked "hot" and referring to girls as "tricks." He cocked his head to the side at a sharper angle and with more arrogance than he used to after saying something he thought was clever, but still rubbed his nose with the back of his hand the same way he always had, with a lack of the self-conscious narcissistic mediation she hated that'd invaded his other movements. He was changing, but she wasn't going to lose him.

Kale refused to learn the importance of education no matter how hard Colleen tried to teach it because evil education, which he'd always associate with the rich people who filled the city she lived in with their superfluous possessions, had taken his beloved sister away. Colleen, on the other hand, did not associate education at all with her rich neighbors whom she too despised. She felt education was saving her from becoming a white-trash teenage bride like every other girl she'd

graduated high school with. Without the university she thought she'd have to start abusing prescription medication to cope with existence, and so being away from Kale was just an unfortunate side effect of having her life saved. Neither could come close to fathoming the other's point of view, just as neither could understand how they'd come to be so dependent upon each other.

Colleen had taken up smoking conscious of all the negative health effects, conscious of how her university friends would turn up their noses in disgust, in an effort to remain close to her brother, a desperate attempt to salvage common ground. Colleen kept herself estranged from her peers by acting more white-trash than she actually was, much as she'd kept herself estranged from her high school classmates by acting more cosmopolitan than she actually was. Her fellow university students reeked of money and easy living, with their smart phones and designer bags that their parents paid for along with their tuition. Colleen said she couldn't relate to these people that didn't have to work for anything, but was really just a loner who avoided any connection with others. She had a very low opinion of human beings. Her brother escaped this filter because, at the age of one year and twenty-two days when he entered into her life, it was not yet in place. Kale was the only one who got past it.

Seeing Kale and his friends, people who'd made the incomprehensible choice not to leave, contentedly hanging out at Denny's reminded Colleen of how odd her simple decision to get the hell out of there was. Neither of them was quite sure how she'd come to the revelation that she could leave. The act of leaving is simple. The realization that it's possible to leave is the hard part, the part her brother couldn't accept even with her ecstatic ravings about classes and city life. He came to visit her sometimes. Colleen pushed her second mattress onto the floor, though they sometimes slept next to each other on the same bed anyway. They walked around the city, him holding her hand even though it reduced his chances of getting hit on, staring at the cars and people and businesses as if they were at the zoo. They both felt that the bustling humanity before them was something outside themselves.

Colleen was loneliest after Kale left, maybe because of his eagerness to do so. He made walking out the door of her apartment look so easy, so natural, that she was forced to understand he didn't belong there. She'd mope around her apartment when Kale left and clean up after him, cataloguing the things he left behind: crumbs from lime-flavored tortilla chips, dirty dishes, guitar picks, empty packs of cigarettes. The most interesting and annoying findings were the ones he left in Colleen's bed. His random pocket change imbedded itself in her space, continuing to turn up long after he left. She'd wake from an afternoon nap with a nickel stuck to her bare thigh, former president's face pressed into her flesh. She'd pull back the sheets to find Abraham Lincoln glaring up at her. Change on the kitchen table, bathroom sink, under rugs—she didn't know how so much money could flow from a kid so poor.

Shortly after Kale got his tattoo he left behind black skin peelings on her blue-and-white checkered sheets. The tattoo was a quotation from Dr. Seuss, one of Colleen's favorite authors. On the inside of his bicep in Gothic black lettering he had printed the word "UNLESS." Their entire lives she had to whine incessantly to get him to read The Lorax with her, so the tattoo was a small victory. There was no way he could look at it or tell someone about it without thinking of her. Kale left dyed black hairs too, but Colleen's were longer. Their dead hairs sought each other out on the floor of her apartment to form tangled black knots. Once he left his rotting black leather wallet, full of the forgeries of Denny's coupons that he lived on. Kale left things behind wherever he went because the tight jeans he loved were meant for women, who were meant to carry purses, and everything spilled out of his shallow pockets.

Kale had picked Colleen up from the Greyhound station earlier that evening. Colleen didn't have a car because she was terrified of driving and had no use for one in the city. She had to take a city bus from her apartment to the Greyhound station, then the Greyhound to their hometown where Kale had to pick her up. This stretched a commute that could've taken half an hour to almost two, but Colleen felt she

met interesting people riding buses, so she didn't really mind. Traveling alone made her feel self-sufficient, and the long journey increased her anticipation of seeing Kale, so as long as the bus didn't smell too strongly of urine, she found the trip pleasant.

Kale's enormous, fifteen year old, green Lincoln was sitting in the parking lot when Colleen arrived, music blasting from the cassette player, and she clumsily ran out of the bus with her acoustic guitar on her shoulder. Kale got out of the car to let her in—the passenger door didn't open—and gave her a hug and kiss. The pack of cigarettes bulging out of the pocket of his flannel crushed against her cheek. “I wish you'd clean some of this shit out of here,” she said as she shoved fast food trash and empty cigarette packs onto the floor. “Maybe you could get a girlfriend if your car wasn't so nasty.” He ignored her.

Though Kale had one of those fancy car ashtrays that could hold hundreds of butts and put the cigarette out for you, the front seat of his car was still covered in ash. The backseat was full of everything he needed to live: a guitar, a banjo, his entire wardrobe, a Tupperware container full of tobacco and cigarette tubes, a blanket, and more trash. Rarely did Kale return to the apartment he shared with their mother. He ignored his hunger pangs and crashed at friends' houses, napped in a booth at Denny's, or went without sleep.

Colleen was glad of her decision to skip dinner as they drove away from the bus station. The Lincoln had no suspension, so she became horribly nauseated if she rode with him for longer than twenty minutes. Every bump felt twice as high as it should have. Each time Colleen visited their hometown things looked different. More businesses had gone under, so places where there should've been neon signs, advertisements, and parked cars were vacant. Walmart was reliably well-lit and crowded. The movie theater was still there, though it had been reduced to showing only the two biggest blockbusters at any given time. The street they drove down was lined with fast food joints, some operating and some empty.

“So, what do you wanna do?” Colleen asked. “We have a while before you need to be to work.” Kale made some vague I-don’t-know-what-do-you-wanna-do type noises in his nose. “We can go to Denny’s if you want. I don’t know why you think I hate all your friends, but I don’t, okay? Let’s just go there until you have to work.”

“Okay.”

She was kind of lying. Something about Kale’s new friends put her on edge, but she couldn’t figure out exactly what it was and decided to try and be diplomatic. Through their childhood and until she moved away they’d spent most of their time together and had the same friends. Partly Colleen was jealous because Kale’s new friends got to spend more time with him than she did, which she realized was irrational but still didn’t seem fair. Partly she felt they were replacing her, and this filled her with rage. Partly she felt that his new friends were unintelligent and not very interesting, but she wasn’t sure whether she wasn’t just being a snob. When Colleen visited home, she was always self-conscious about acting like a snob, because she thought the spoiled rich brats she went to school with had turned her into one.

Subconsciously Colleen blamed the new friends for their new rifts in communication that scared her so much she’d erupt in tears if Kale didn’t hear something she’d said or misinterpreted a facial expression. The real cause of the problem was distance. They both knew it, but refused to do more about it than complain about how little the other visited. She’d been shy her entire life, but for the first time she felt her brother was misreading her shyness. Kale should’ve been able to distinguish between her I-hate-this silence and her I’m-ok-with-this-I-just-have-nothing-to-say-right-now silence. Kale should’ve known that Colleen not saying a word the entire time she was with him and his friends didn’t mean she wanted to leave. Sitting at Denny’s for hours on end was the thing to do for community college drop-outs in her town, and Colleen sometimes found it interesting from a purely ethnographic standpoint.

The caffeine was making Colleen more nervous than usual; she bit at her cuticles and tore the Lipton tag dangling off the side of her stained mug to shreds. There was a new girl in her brother's life who was bound to show up. Kale wasn't good with girls, he'd never had a serious girlfriend, but every new bimbo he became infatuated with put Colleen on edge. Being displaced in her brother's affections by a community-college drop-out with the IQ of a Barbie doll wasn't going to happen. Sure enough, Jane strode into Denny's with a confidence inappropriate for a shitty highway diner, obnoxiously well-dressed in an artsy-bohemian vein, clothes purchased from Urban Outfitters with her parent's money.

"Hey! Look at us. We spend, like, everyday here. We're, like, best friends." Jane giggled, but stopped abruptly when she noticed Kale's discomfort. "I mean, except for your sister. Everyone knows she's your best friend." Jane laughed another fake female laugh and was saved from the fury staring back at her by the waitress. "Hi, Chelsea. I'll just have an order of chili cheese fries and a Coke."

The bitch can eat nasty food and still be that thin, Colleen thought, hunger gnawing at her, giving her the shakes of low blood sugar that her brother never got. Colleen knew this little goddamn blonde whore idiot was trying to fuck Kale, or at least manipulate his affections to her own advantage, but she had the nerve to try to cultivate a friendship with him first, maybe in preparation for some deep, meaningful relationship. Stupid slut. Since finding out about Jane and spying on her Facebook page when Kale accidentally forgot to log out on her laptop, Colleen had started having the dreams again. Kale's male friends never caused them, but they posed less of a threat. Colleen believed women, and especially Kale's crushes, were demanding shrews who'd suck every ounce of a guy's time and personality until there's nothing left. In the dreams, Colleen murdered his female suitors, ripping skin and hair to shreds, beating flesh against concrete, left with nothing but an inanimate bruised body like a bruised fruit. These dreams made her question her sanity sometimes—was she capable of doing anything that violent? Colleen knew that

their father had spent some time in jail when he was young for almost killing a man with a golf club, and she felt that same blind rage passed to her through his semen heat in her veins. Glowering at the dumb blonde before her, imagining the myriad of ways Jane could hurt her brother, Colleen was scared she might be.

Colleen saw Jane's relief when Kale's new best guy friend, Ben, came in, greeting the entire staff of Denny's before coming to their table.

"How's it goin', man? Hey, Chelsea, get me a coffee and a cup of ice."

"It's goin' great, man. I came up with this new guitar thing today. I'm tellin' you, it was some hot shit." Ben's arrival was a relief for Colleen too because she was under less pressure to talk. Over the next hour, five more of Kale's friends showed up, crowding into the red booths. Kale's conversations with his friends irritated Colleen because they were full of ridiculous narcissistic posturing, tasteless jokes, and references to different situations in which they'd gotten fucked up and done something stupid. His words, tone of voice, and subject matter were completely different when he talked to her, which made everything he said over his Denny's coffee sound fake.

After sitting in the sticky booth for a couple hours they went out to Kale's car so he could get high before starting his night shift. He used the same excuses to justify his marijuana habit he'd used when he started smoking cigarettes; it helped his anxiety, he needed it to stay awake, his stomach hurt without it. Colleen had succumbed to the cigarettes, but she hated the weed. She thought marijuana makes people stupid, and the loss of her intelligence terrified her more than anything. She wasn't pretty, or nice, or funny; being smart was the only positive quality Colleen possessed. She recognized the hypocrisy of refusing to smoke pot because it's bad for you while she starved herself, but decided to ignore it. Maybe she smoked cigarettes instead of pot for no other reason than because she thought one would make you skinny and the other fat, but she stuck to her familiar excuses. She knew her brother was just as intelligent as she was, and if Kale could do something stupid on purpose, so could she.

Kale lit up with his stupid penis-shaped lighter that he thought was funny, but Colleen hated. It was made of fleshy rubber, had huge veins sticking out, and she found it repulsive. Colleen sat next to him in the Denny's parking lot and stared out the car window, covered with ash and reeking of marijuana. "I fucking hate that lighter—it's disgusting," she said, not turning to look at him.

"Fine. You know what? I'll just get rid of it then." Instead of chucking it out the window like she hoped, Kale began to pick the rubber apart and throw the pieces at her, until nothing but the metal tube was left. "Happy?" Tears streamed down Colleen's face, but she was turned away and didn't make a sound. She felt trapped by this malevolent person she no longer knew, her own hometown a strange foreign country she had no way to navigate without him. "I have to go to work now." Kale started the car and waved at his friends milling around the parking lot as the Lincoln bounced over the curb and drove away.

Since Colleen worked at the library and had class during the day, one of the only ways they could spend time together was if she accompanied Kale to his night shift at the hotel. Colleen was afraid she'd get him fired, but Kale insisted it was fine and he didn't care if he did get the axe. She sat on the couch in the lobby reading classic works of literature for her English classes while he worked, and he came to sit next to her when he didn't have anything to do. They didn't talk as much as they used to, just sat next to each other, her head on his shoulder, his head on her head, dyed black hair blending together.

The new physical tics and facial expressions her brother had developed in Colleen's absence made him more fascinating to watch. She'd always been obsessed with watching his hands. They were odd-looking; large, flat, with incredibly long fingers that ended in nails bitten to the quick. Tobacco stains had appeared between the first two fingers on each hand. Kale's hands looked new to Colleen when they cradled a cigarette, confidently flicking the end with his thumb. They were too large for his pockets, and she loved the strange, uncomfortable way he

rummaged about in his pants, spilling spare change in the search for his lighter.

There was a deep, jagged scar on Kale's right thumb from an incident with a hand saw when they were in high school. He'd been cutting branches in the yard as Colleen watched, and they were discussing their mother's new boyfriend. Bad thing to do while using dangerous tools. He sliced his thumb open and looked up at her in shock. Always useless in emergency situations, Colleen cursed and screamed while Kale spattered blood all over them, the yard, and the kitchen. Their mother attempted to remedy the wound by closing it with glue used to apply plastic fingernails, but it wouldn't stop bleeding. After putting in ten stitches, the nurse at the free clinic said he'd come close to cutting a tendon that would've rendered his thumb useless. The scar still hadn't lost its raised, purple presence.

Their father abandoned them, but their mother was no paradigm of perseverance either. She nursed her loss with a new sexual promiscuity both frightening and disgusting. She courted men in online chat rooms designed for people looking for sex. It wasn't uncommon for her to send Colleen and Kale a text in the day telling them not to come home after school until she called them. Kale was angry, but he was so good at pretending, deluding himself that there was nothing there. Colleen became homicidal, picking fights with her mother's boyfriends until her mother stopped bringing them home, then stopped coming home herself. Sometimes Colleen thought Kale was being reasonable and handling things better than she was; other times she thought he was just a coward. When she saw him slice his finger nearly in two, she realized they shared more rage than she'd thought.

His hands might've seemed foreign to her while he smoked, but Colleen hated watching them fiddle with his phone. She considered herself pretty anti-technology, but Kale was the opposite, and Colleen was more jealous of his phone than of any friend or girlfriend he had. Kale was constantly stroking it, touching it, reading its work, listening to its stories, checking its various bodily functions to make sure it was

all right. She'd glare at him as soon as she heard its vibrations, curled up in his pocket, begging for attention. Kale knew she hated it, but thought she was being unreasonable, so he ignored her rolling eyes and frustrated sighs. He'd spend his free time at Denny's with Ben while both of them texted other people and barely said a word to each other. This pastime seemed completely useless to Colleen, but that was the key to their difference—he didn't need all his time to have a use.

While it was a bizarre way to spend time together, Colleen enjoyed accompanying her brother to the hotel. She loved being awake while everyone else was asleep, the intense solitary feeling of early dawn. Only the hotel's strangest occupants were awake during Kale's shift, standing outside to smoke and taking dozens of the complementary cookies he baked. She read the old issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* sitting in the lobby, took an occasional cat nap on the couch, and sat next to him on the benches outside during his cigarette breaks. She loved how eerie the streetlights looked when the sky was beginning to lighten in the morning.

The night shift at the hotel consisted of hours of boredom punctuated by moments of incredible weirdness. Around one a.m., Ben stormed into the lobby, completely drunk, freaking out about having lost his credit card at the local bar. He'd stolen the card from his mother that very morning and now was without funds to buy cigarettes. Though Colleen found him mildly amusing and they shared an interest in Edgar Allen Poe, she regarded him as if he were from another planet. Colleen couldn't understand how one could still be sneaking out of one's parents' home at the age of twenty-five and not be too addicted to hard drugs to have friends. When a handicapped hotel guest limped out the front door for a cigarette, Kale and Ben sat in the lobby and waited until the guy was out of earshot to laugh at him. Colleen laughed meanly too, but at them, not the disabled man.

After Ben stumbled drunkenly away to go steal more money from his parents for cigarettes, a tall man with an afro came down from upstairs, told Kale he was expecting a guest, and that, if she wasn't

blonde and cute, not to give her his room number. The woman in question appeared not thirty seconds after the man disappeared up the elevator. She must've passed inspection because she was directed to the man's room. After she left, Colleen and Kale raised eyebrows at each other from across the lobby and Kale mouthed, "She's gonna have sex with the afro guy." When the woman re-appeared two hours later to weave her way back out to her car, they exchanged the same glance behind her back and smothered their laughs. That night it was raining while they sat outside for four o'clock cigarettes. They wore leather jackets, and his arm was around her shoulders. The droplets fell hard and straight down, and Colleen thought the rain in the parking lot was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Around five she drifted off on the couch, crushing her Shakespeare anthology beneath her, but Kale shook her awake soon after. "I've gotta make breakfast, and people are starting to come down. You gotta get up," he whispered. A reporter on the television in the breakfast room was re-glorifying the horror of September 11th for the disaster's tenth anniversary. Kale let her eat the breakfast he made if Colleen pretended she was a guest and didn't let on that she knew him. They never had any problems because, with her head stuck in a book at 5:30 a.m., no one said any more than good morning. When she finished, she pretended she was leaving and sat in Kale's car in the far corner of the parking lot before his shift ended, striding confidently out of the too eager automatic doors as if she had somewhere important to be.

He'd agreed to drive her back to her apartment that morning. He could sleep there in the day, then drive back to work that night. Neither of them was in a fit state to drive, both so exhausted they felt as if their bodies were made of cement. Colleen offered, but since the car had no title, plates, or insurance, Kale refused. He didn't want her to get in trouble if they got pulled over. If you got arrested, I'd make them take me with you, Colleen thought. Where else would I go?

Colleen preferred when Kale drove. She'd been terrified of driving since she'd totaled their mother's vehicle, nearly killing the both of

them, a month after getting her license, in one of the moments of intense stupidity that punctuated her high intelligence. The four a.m. rain hadn't diminished, and the windshield wipers smacked at it pathetically, smearing water across the window and making it even harder to see. Colleen's heart raced with the sickening mix of terror and excitement she loved about reckless driving. Kale wasn't a very attentive driver, but riding with him was exciting because then she felt her life was in his hands, and she liked being unsure what he'd do with it.

"Will you roll me a cigarette?" Kale asked. Colleen's heart raced as they dodged traffic cones and semis, the road before them a watery blur. That highway was in a constant state of construction from March until November every year. The sedentary cranes and bulldozers rose regally above the muddy median like dinosaurs. She reached into the back seat for his plastic container. Colleen was horrible at rolling cigarettes; she ruined at least three tubes before managing to do it correctly. "It needs some more tobacco. Here, turn it upside down and clean it out. No, no, leave the thing open while you're doing that." Kale tried to coach her, but she was pathetic.

"I can't do it." She threw the container into the trash pile at her feet.

"Ok, then I'm gonna have to stop and do it myself. I'm falling asleep."

The sun strained to get out from behind the clouds, but it was losing, and the white sky turned everything grey. Colleen stuck her left thumb in her mouth, peeling off chunks of her cuticle with her teeth. Kale hated this nervous habit of hers and yanked her bleeding hand out from between her lips. He held it firmly—the same way their father used to grasp the back of their necks so he wouldn't lose them in crowds. She'd done it this time, the sticky blood slid between their hands and dripped into the cup holder, giving off the smell of dirty metal. They clutched each other's hands as they flew.

Terrance “TJ” Scott

Terrance “TJ” Scott



Senior, English and African American Studies.

I was born and raised in Detroit and I published my first poetry collection at age 17. The poetry I will be reading was written in Florence, Italy in Fall 2010.

Paradise Valley

Ganja, girls and guns- the best toys in the hood
to rappers, thugs, gangs- all boys in the hood

Trade sorrows for pride and get dressed for the storm,
Love is not a threat to the voice from the hood

Shush Nicki Minaj with a Coltrane record,
yield elegance, beauty, and poise to the hood

There's no grocery stores, but they'll scream racism
if they take iPhones and Androids from the hood

The big banks were bailed out by the government,
and they still did not share any joy with the hood.

Learn how to die in order to learn to live,
single mothers must fill both voids in the hood.

Sticks and stones break bones, we need brick throwers
To not give up and make noise for the hood!

Don't forget us Terrance, we know you'll make it out-
Brute force holds us here, not choice- from the 'Hood

Starline

Science lesson.

The heart is an organ that is essential to the life of human beings.

It pumps blood throughout the body,
Giving each body part its proper dosage to function.

Life lesson.

The heart is the center of a family that is essential for happiness.

It pumps laughs and love through each person,
Giving every member the love and motivation to achieve any dream.

What happens when your heart is taken from you?

I ask myself that question every night,
Realizing that the answer is not mine to know.
I've never taken a life, I just watch them go.

I peek my head out of my Detroit window
At the storm that has swept across the entire city.
As the murder and unemployment rates remain the country's highest,
I watch this thunderstorm unfold over my very eyes daily.
The streets flood with blood and tears of people of all ages
If you're human, you're a target.
From little 7 year olds sitting on their couches,
To old men excited from their casino winnings,
No one is safe.

But the wound is only numb until it happens to you.

Auntie...how did this happen?
We're gonna graduate college and get married one day,
We were supposed to move you out of the city,
I was gonna come home to cook you Christmas dinner.

But instead I'm writing this poem.
With malice in my heart dark as the dirt under my fingernails.
That's why I clipped them.
Because if there was one thing I knew about you,
It was laugh first, and worry later.
So my hands are clean.
My heart is heavy, but my hands are clean.
My eyes are puffy, but my hands are clean.
Because my Auntie's name is Starline.

She was known for her bright smile, her bright laugh, and her bright
personality.
And she chopped up her heart like firewood,
Knowing we burn brighter in pieces.
So that we can shine her light across the world!

I peek my head out of my Detroit window,
Up against the wind,
Storm clouds flooding the streets with tears,
But I have a piece of Star that will light my path
I want the rest of my life to start right now
And my piece of Star will pace me and light my path
Someday we'll be married
And I can trust her vagina won't be a walk in closet
Because she learned from Star, and Star lit her path.

Starline, spelled like Star Line,
Sounds like you have a personal highway express to Heaven
I'll ride it someday to be with you,
Until then, I'll make you proud.

Sister Soul-diers

Sisters,
my beautiful sisters,
 with eye sockets like caves
 and vision from mahogany-colored eyes
 that seeps through every crack of a man's heart.
I see you.

Glossy half-moon smiles sparkling like morning mimosa,
 I see you.

Searching for Mr. Right and looking passed Mr. Right In Front Of
You,
 I see you.

Through wigs, weave, waves, and fake eyelashes flapping like eagle's
wings,
 I see you.

I see flashes of lightning yesterdays,
 and thunderstorm tomorrows.
There is beauty in your natural beauty,
 and dignity in being yourself.
Men beg for PMS to Please Make Sense,
 but I'm begging for the world to gain common sense
 and since some make dollars and some scrape cents,
 it's time to swallow the nonsense and rinse.

Sisters,
I believe in you.
I respect you.
I encourage you.
So strut you stuff,
and stay cool like the other side of the pillow!
Tell whoever asks you,

“I’m not bitter, I’m just better!”

I want you to get to a place where you don’t feel the whoopings
anymore!

When I see you, I remember Ida B. Wells,

Gwendolyn Brooks,

Sojourner Truth,

Lena Horne

and Billie Holiday.

I see Alice Walker,

Toni Morrison,

Marian Anderson,

and Harriet Tubman.

I think of Angela Davis,

Mary McLeod Bethune,

Shirley Chisholm,

and Nina Simone.

And I hope for

Nikki Giovanni,

Maya Angelou,

Oprah Winfrey,

and Michelle Obama.

I see armies of strong sisters,

with their chins pointing at the sky,

proudly saluting

Elaine,

Katrina,

and

Lesia,

and honoring all survivors of breast cancer!

We don’t need a moment of silence

to acknowledge those that have passed on;

There’s too much the world needs to hear

to keep quiet!

So shout out to breast cancer,
and shout out to all women!
Let's take a match and burn your shadows,
so all that will be left is your reflections,
and the world is will see you,
the way I see you.

Sophia Usow

Sophia Usow



Sophomore—History Major

Sophia is Chicago-grown, a lover of Quentin Tarantino movies, and currently single.

Whisper

I.

(hi honey its your mom calling to make sure you're alright you texted dad at four in the morning last night saying you wanted to come home i've left you three messages already please call me back)

II.

(yell herbie hancock out the window in an affluent neighborhood outside of detroit just to hear its milky echo and remember who you are)

III.

(i read kurt vonnegut's tweets on a semi-regular basis but i still haven't finished one of his books now what does that say about me as a person)

IV.

(math's a breeze take for instance this simple equation: half the time i'm thinking will i ever be happy? and the other half i just am)

V.

(the constellation of freckles on his back remind me that sometimes I make meaning where there is none like how my astronomy teacher in high school told us astrology is a human comfort in the face of a dark, blinking unknown yet I still read my horoscope)

VI.

(how did it get so big and how did we get so small)

VII.

(light ripples stripes onto the wall dark light dark light dark light as
you hurry through them to the door they are sewn onto you, a
momentary dress of sun window shade and shivering golden dust)

VIII.

(jumping off the diving board thrilled at the speed of descent yet
consumed and terrified by the water's sting when you are about to land
i press stop so that you are forever suspended in time eternal with
petrified joy)

IX.

(dancing alone with rod stewart in my bedroom like tomorrow doesn't
matter and yesterday was just a whispered dream)

X.

(the tearing out feeling when she realizes it's over)

