Windows
Spring 2020

Windows Committee

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Windows is a collection of students’ creative work, published by Nashua Community College on a semester basis. Windows reserves the right to edit or reject any material. The artwork does not directly represent the written pieces. The content of this publication does not reflect the College’s views. The Nashua Community College Student Senate funds this project.
The Spring 2020 semester was dramatically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to virtual learning. Despite these shifts, the students in the Windows Club were deeply committed to completing this publication. We felt like the submitted stories, poems, photographs, and artwork that all reflect what life should be needed to be celebrated—now more than ever. The production process posed challenges as we figured out how to work together to design a magazine via Zoom, but we are thrilled with the final outcome. We hope it gives you hope and encouragement during this unsettling time and can remind you that creative endeavors are always worth pursuing, no matter what the circumstances.
The Light Above the Stairs

By: Kendra Locke

When I was younger, living in my childhood house, my mom would always remind me to turn off the light above the stairs, seeing as I would always somehow forget to do so. It was one of those poorly designed type of things where, in order to change the lightbulb, we’d need to balance a ladder on the stairs, and that was never happening in a house with a single mother and two young daughters.

Like most other children, I had a persistent and nagging fear whenever I’d go up the stairs in the dark. The image of a black hand with sharp, scraggly talons reaching out of the darkness to grab my unsuspecting ankle filled me with terror, leaving me to scramble up the stairs as fast as I could. This, oftentimes, would mean that I’d conveniently forget to turn off that light. To me, it was a safe and warm reminder that, as long as it was on, I would be okay.

As I got older, though, I lost that dependency on the light. Childlike fears moved away and made room for fears of the real world. A monstrous hand in the dark no longer seemed like such a threat anymore. It wasn’t tangible. It wasn’t real.

Well, last night I awoke from a dream about that house that I used to live in. In the dream, I was myself now, meaning that I hadn’t lived there in five years. But, in that dream, I drove by and noticed that exact light above the stairs was left on, even though the house had been vacant since we moved out. I went inside, the magic of a dream ignoring the reality that I likely couldn’t get in today without breaking a window. But I simply opened the door, meaning only to turn off that one light and go home.

When I opened the door, though, I saw that each room in the house was flooded with beautiful, soft light. I knew immediately that this was coming from that spot above the stairs. It glowed with radiance, showing me a home that looked entirely like the one that I lived in when I was young. Because dreams have that power to distort the truth, the light was bright enough to see every corner of the house.

To my astonishment, my old home was exactly as it had been in my childhood. It was as if I had just opened the door to my own life, only ten years ago. The smell of brownies greeted me warmly, and I smiled to see the red pan that my mom had always used to make them on the stove, cooling. I floated in that dreamlike way down the hall, taking in my surroundings in awe.

A green and white blanket was haphazardly draped over the side of our couch in the living room, the TV turned on to the nightly news. A puzzle, half completed and likely missing a few pieces, was left on the dining room table. Some of my favorite stuffed animals were all lined up in a row on the floor of the playroom, as if my sister and I had only just been there moments ago, laughing and playing together. In the bathroom on the counter there lay three toothbrushes - a purple one, a pink one, and an electric one - all together as a little family. The white light poured over each object, each trinket, each thing that I hardly noticed as a child but celebrated to see now.

I approached the staircase, observing the railing that was missing some piece of hardware, making it a little wobbly to hold on to. I looked at the carpeted stairs. I smiled to think of the times that I accidentally slipped going down them, and, laughing through the tears, would reassure my mom that I was okay. Of the times that I’d yell up them to my sister to come and get dinner. Of all the times that my sister and I would fly down them, giggling, as our mom chased us, pretending to be a monster.

I floated to the top of the staircase, feeling the carpet and counting the steps. Sixteen of them, just as I had remembered. I got to the light switch, the light now almost blinding me with its power and its brilliance.

I thought about this light above the staircase. How it illuminated all the warmth and love of my childhood home and reminded me of every happy and beautiful moment.

My hand reached to turn it off. But I decided to leave the light on instead.
Your Heart

By: Erinn Beatty

I want to learn so many languages
Regardless of how many people speak it
Whether a billion people, like Mandarin
Or slowly fading away like Frisian
Because language is a beautiful thing
Sounds and symbols with predetermined meanings
Constantly growing and changing
Over centuries
Words gaining new meanings and losing old ones.
New words spring to life daily.
We make these sounds that when strung together make a song
when strung together explain thoughts running
through your head
when strung together tell someone how much they mean
to you.
when strung together you can make terrible puns
unique to only your language.
We make these symbols that when grouped together make a love note
when grouped together make a poem
when grouped together make a recipe
when grouped together make a book
How many songs do I not understand?
How many thoughts will I never hear?
How many people out there can I not talk to because I can’t understand
their language
because I can’t understand their hearts?
How many terrible puns will I not hear?
How many missed chances at love will I have?
How many poems can I never read?
How many foods will I miss out on?
How many stories will I never know?
Show me your favorite places
your favorite food
your favorite songs.

Teach me your language

Paradise

By: Kate Lord

It is green Eden I miss,
The lush, balmy sunshine
I call bliss
Heaven on Earth is to escape,
To delight
Or lie in the nape
Of a summer’s night
How still and soft it is
To look at the night sky,
And rest
The chill cannot reach you
Only the dew
To refresh and renew
The same grass that withstands
The dead of winter.
The Bomb

By: Connor Gramstorff

This morning I left my house as I would have any other day. The sun was out, birds sang out their desperate love ballads, and President Kennedy lay on a slab of stainless steel somewhere in Texas. The world was turning in on itself, but it was still a secret to most, despite every other radio ad warning of the devastation about to befall us. One day someone was bound to push the button, surely, and this entire nothing town would become nothing to the strongest degree. There would be nothing more than dirt, dust, and ash, my father always said, half-joking. The sequence played out in my head the same way each morning as the muffled voice of the news anchor came through the thin walls of my bedroom. One day, it would happen. The sirens would sound, the wealthy would scamp to the comfort of their long-standing fallout shelters, and the rest of us would duck, cover, and brace for impact. Then, the flash. The walls of what I once called my home would vaporize around me, leaving not even a memory of what once was. I wondered, maybe if it hit somewhere like San Francisco if I would survive. I wondered what sort of sickening mutants I would come to call friends or enemies. I wondered who else would live and who would die. I wondered if all of this was just a clever plot hatched by the government to motivate us for the coming Olympic games. I told my mother goodbye with a short wave and a “See you later, Ma,” but I wondered if I would. Who’s to say today wasn’t the day we finally got fed up and said, “So be it” to mutually assured destruction? Who’s to say I’m anything more than a cloud of radioactive dust hallucinating the world that once was?

I lit a joint as I walked my bike from the garage to the end of the driveway. It was another beautiful California summer day, so said the neighbors to each other as they passed by homes identical to their own. I took the left on Maple and another right on Pine, ironic street names considering the acres of forest that once stood in their place. A train horn sounded in the distance, drawing my attention briefly, but for a second too long. Before I knew it, time around me had slowed almost to a stop. Time has a funny way of deciding when, where, and how to move. The cherry red Stingray struck me from the left side, sending me up and into the suddenly delicate glass of the windshield. I saw the sun reflect in the driver’s mirrored aviator glasses, saw the blood leave his face drop by drop. I saw cherry red paint beneath my helpless body, and I felt glass crumble beneath me as the windshield caved under the force of impact.
Euphoria

By: Megan Rooney

The summer air shifts from a blanket of warmth
To a thick and heavy haze.
A lone weeping willow bends and yields to a gust of wind,
As the overgrown grass sways and bows
To the commanding grey clouds which swell in the sky.

The sound of thunder cracks in the distance.
I count and wait for the lightning,
Five, Six, Seven.
The sky lights up as the flash of a camera,
I smile for the picture.
Seven miles away.

I can smell the rain before it comes.
It carries with it an unfathomable, endearing nature.
But I must reach for the right word;
It is of pine, musk, earth, forest,
It is life.

I sink my feet into the soil.
One by one, drops spatter across my bare skin,
Giving me a chill from its cool shock.
I wait for the inevitable downpour,
And in this I feel I can fly.

Young Napoleons

By: Julissa Castro

They tried to extinguish the young Napoleons in us
We didn't let them, like lions we fought
A holy trinity, an unbreakable bond
Kids set to conquer the world, to make a name for themselves
Building our kingdoms out of dreams and passions

For my sister, heart of gold, Queen of my world
For my brother, mastermind, King of my world
“Dream,” said my mother, “Create,” said my father
We did. We grew and went separate ways
But forever, we were bound to that dream

And now as we say goodbye to each other
I am pleased to see those young Napoleons didn't die
Instead, they evolved into something better
We had found our next conquest, the afterlife
And with the dream in our hearts, we started our journey.
His Love

By: Lindsey Morlock

Morning light beamed through the spaces in the blinds. It woke me, earlier than I wanted. I rolled over to move away from the brightness, locking eyes with him as I settled my head into the pillow. He smiled with closed lips as his hand graced the top of my head. We lay for a moment and I pretended to fall back asleep. Through my closed eyes, I felt him looking at me, staring. I felt his finger run though my long knotted hair. I felt my irritation grow. I knew I should be smiling, too. Feeling self conscious of my messy hair and lack of makeup, I rolled over again. Now his hand was on my hip and he pressed himself against me. His arm wrapped around my body and his hand rested on my stomach. It was almost as if he knew what was growing inside of there, although I hadn’t told him yet.

The increasing feeling of suffocation made it easier than usual to get out of bed. Stepping into the bathroom, I made a conscious decision to lock the door while telling myself, “It’s just a habit.” I showered, enjoying my alone time while trying to wash away how I felt. The doorknob rattled and I silently thanked myself for locking it. He would’ve just come in, peed, and maybe handed me my toothbrush before leaving the bathroom with an, “I love you, baby.” I would’ve smiled at him and then rolled my eyes to myself.

In the kitchen, a beautiful breakfast was laid out on the table. There were waffles, cut fruit, bacon and coffee made just the way I liked it. I was blessed with this every morning, without fail, although I wasn’t feeling very hungry this morning and seeing the food only made me nauseous. I took a few bites and then felt my stomach lurch. I shamefully told him that I felt sick and apologized for not being more appreciative of the beautiful spread. He only smiled and softly kissed my forehead.

“He’s so incredible,” my friends and family would say. “I wish my man would do that for me.” “You’re so lucky.” “He’s a keeper.” I knew they were right. I couldn’t ask for a better boyfriend. He never got mad, always took care of me and loved me unconditionally. He would be the most incredible husband and the best dad, but something was wrong. I shouldn’t feel this way. It was okay, before, when it was just a fling that I could end at any time. But now, I had to tell him and I could only hope that he would be just as terrified as I was.
Glory’s Hidden Shadows

By: Greg Danner

My eyes behold a grandeur on some
Distant hill, some faraway place kissed
By a mystic grace. I imagine myself sitting
There, at peace with the golden, radiant
Air, yet quietly plotting how I might steal
Some more perfection from the gods.
No matter how deep the water goes,
Or how purely it flows, I only know the
Restless tug of tomorrow’s promised glow.
Will I escape from this endless battle for
Some mirage, where water eludes my
Desperate, outstretched hands? Or might
I finally find some solace on the solid
Ground of more ordinary lands?

The idea of something is more alluring
Than the thing itself could ever be. I
Long for every beautiful perfection, but
In the end I always return to me. Whatever
Back alleys I do not wish to face, whatever
Memories I seek to erase, in the end a
Thousand mirrors will only show my
One true face. If my legs run, I reach a
New destination, but it still holds the
Dreams and shadows of the former
Place. I’d still cry, though my tears
May hit a different floor. I’d still
Try, if only to convince myself I could
Be different from who I was before.

I sense a vast, unexplored ocean within,
Wide open spaces whispering an invitation,
If only I’d begin. Surface waves only hint at
The oncoming tsunami, a primal storm of
Nature threatening the innocent shore.
I will survive this, and on the other side
There lies a better version of bliss.
I do not see it, I cannot feel it, but
Its gorgeous voice calls to me, and
It says that all my life will be right.
I am consoled, and then I return to the night.

Deliverance

By: Megan Rooney

You didn’t stand a chance
Didn’t anyone tell you
Nothing whole can come from the broken

But I believe I can reverse the hands of time
The touch of my hand as a lighthouse in the storm
Until this unending battle consumes me

Old moments rage as nightmares
An untamed fury breaks free
An illness I had meant to drown

A soft touch hardens to stone
Gentle words into shards of glass
Sharp enough to pierce the skin

A haunting that will chase me forever
Until I come to realize
I could never save you
North Carolina Light

By Corrina Seaward

I woke up but did not open my eyes. I lay underneath the fluffy yet light coverings. The pillow under my head had more give to it than I would have typically liked, but it didn’t matter to me. The over abundance of them had more than made up for it. The sun was starting to shine through the linen-like curtains of our hotel room, and I left my eyes closed to adjust to the light, knowing that I could take my time rising that morning. Next to me I felt the stirring of a body, and I extended my hand over to it. Lightly grabbing Robby’s arm, which was always warmer than my own, I took great comfort in his presence. My body shifted slightly as he rolled over to face me, and I could feel his eyes on me. Finally, I opened my own eyes, blinking to keep them from watering. I raised my head to look at his face and studied it. I had been gazing into that face for almost seven years now, but still memorized it every chance I got, never wanting to forget its imprint on my memory. He smiled, a soft smile that few would notice, but which I recognized as one of significant expression. “Good morning,” he said.

It was almost hard to believe that two months prior I had offhandedly proposed that Robby and I should go on a road trip. To my delighted surprise he agreed. Robby, unlike myself, does not get an intense itch to flee an area as soon as boredom or stagnation sets in. On the contrary, every decision in his book is carefully constructed and well thought out; going out to dinner involves a full investigation to ensure that the restaurant has the highest calculated possibility of providing us with an excellent evening. To be perfectly clear, this is a method that has yet to fail us and it’s something I greatly admire and appreciate. I would be half as prepared, and half as happy, without these lengths he goes to to create moments of guaranteed enjoyment. It does not, however, satisfy the aching, yearning, screaming part of my soul that thrives on unpredictability. It is practically a personal requirement that every so often I take an unexpected and unprecedented adventure. A constant driving curiosity propels me forward into journeys where frankly even I don’t know what will happen next. Therefore, when he consented to not only a road trip, but told me to pick whichever place I wanted to trek to, I didn’t hesitate.

A few cursory google searches and a haphazard comparison of options landed my dart on a small town by the name of Kure Beach, North Carolina. Once the location was chosen, Robby arranged hotel bookings; his thorough tactics were preferred by both of us for seeking out an accommodation least likely to result in bed bugs. Before I knew it we were in the car at 6 AM south bound for places unknown to us.

Throughout the week we spent walking the beaches and cozy streets of Kure Beach, exploring the restaurants and the dive bars, and learning about the local history, I felt comfortable and happy. I had voiced the idea several times, and secretly thought often, that we should just move there. Immerse ourselves in the warmth and welcome of this beautiful town. I had shared these same thoughts two years ago when we had spent time in Bar Harbor, Maine. The appeal and draw of these unfamiliar places seemed more enticing and inviting than the city in which we had chosen to plant ourselves in order to develop a future. It was in these novel and humble towns that I felt a happier and stronger possibility of establishing true roots.

It was in traveling that I had learned the feeling of unbridled freedom. I lived in an apartment one state away from where I had grown up. I had long since received my driver’s license and purchased my own car. For quite some time I had known freedom in a legal and standard sense. Traveling, however, invoked a new sensation: a freeing from my deepest emotions. The geographic distances, these literal changes in scenery, allowed us to escape the burdens of my past. In the sands of Kure Beach, the warmth of the sun protected me from the cold, dark tendrils of my own thoughts.

It was on that very morning that I came to genuinely understand the impact of these feelings. Basking in the rising sun 800 miles from my home, it almost hard to believe that two months prior I had offhandedly proposed that Robby and I should go on a road trip. To my delighted surprise he agreed. Robby, unlike myself, does not get an intense itch to flee an area as soon as boredom or stagnation sets in. On the contrary, every decision in his book is carefully constructed and well thought out; going out to dinner involves a full investigation to ensure that the restaurant has the highest calculated possibility of providing us with an excellent evening. To be perfectly clear, this is a method that has yet to fail us and it’s something I greatly admire and appreciate. I would be half as prepared, and half as happy, without these lengths he goes to to create moments of guaranteed enjoyment. It does not, however, satisfy the aching, yearning, screaming part of my soul that thrives on unpredictability. It is practically a personal requirement that every so often I take an unexpected and unprecedented adventure. A constant driving curiosity propels me forward into journeys where frankly even I don’t know what will happen next. Therefore, when he consented to not only a road trip, but told me to pick whichever place I wanted to trek to, I didn’t hesitate.

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Her Galaxy of Fireflies

By: Madeline Klaessig

She came out with a jar full of grass and twigs and a heart full of hope and wonder.

She ran through the tall grass and giggled as hundreds of stars lit up around her.

They blinked in and out and swirled about like a mini galaxy with her at the center.

She caught a few of them and put her piece of the galaxy into the jar of grass and twigs.

Snapshot

By: Lauren Wiegers

I raise the camera to my eye
Focus fades in and out
I see the image through the lens
There- a click and a flash
In this picture is the world
As it was for one moment

My pen skates across the page
Sometimes hesitating, sometimes scurrying
I search my mind for the perfect word
There- I see it tucked away in a corner
In this poem is life
As raw and bitter and beautiful as it was today

I listen to the song again
Emotions surge through me once more
The notes swirl like my thoughts
There- at once I see things clearly
In this music is my heart
As it ached in this hour

I commemorate it because it hurt
But we can’t forget what has shaped us
I capture it because it made me laugh
And we need to remember what has brought us joy
I speak of it because it is the truth about me
And until we confess the truth
It is all too easy to live a lie

It is sorrow and ecstasy
Confusion and clarity
The way we grieve and the way we exult
It is real
It is life
As it existed for one chapter of our stories.
Peace

By: Mackenzie Francoeur

1: Standing in front of the whole church, I was wearing yoga pants and a very baggy T-shirt that read “MADE NEW” in giant green letters. I listened to my friend, Elisa, talk about my journey here and could not help but smile. After she put the microphone up to me and I spoke my confession of faith, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, my Lord, my Savior.”

Then, she led me to the side of the stage where the low, grey tin bath filled with room temperature water lay, and I stepped in. On each side of me was the church’s pastor and the youth group mentor who I had known since I was fourteen. With a huge smile on my face, I closed my eyes and everything went quiet.

2: I grew up in a broken family. My parent’s divorce was tangled and chaotic. Since I was the oldest child, at eight years old, I was always thrown into the middle of everything. They would fight over money, which parent got which kid and they would express all of their anger, fears, and sadness to me. I was the one who carried all of their burdens over my shoulder like a hobo with his stick.

3: My first relationship was good in the beginning. We laughed a lot and we were with each other 24/7. As time went by, he changed. He was sneaky and amazing at lying. He ended up cheating numerous times. I always went back, something to do with #2, I thought. I was accepting the treatment I watched my parents go through. When I was seventeen he went into the Navy. That was the end of our story.

4: I was diagnosed with manic anxiety. I let everything scare me. I was at rock bottom, or so I thought. My self-confidence was nonexistent, I trusted nobody, I couldn’t go out in public alone and I pushed everyone away because I was terrified of getting hurt. I was alone and it was all my fault.

5: August 19, 2018, one of my childhood friends ended up in the hospital. It had been years since all of the kids from the old neighborhood had all been in the same room; this was not the occasion I wish we had waited for. The hospital misdiagnosed him. At age eighteen, he ended up going into cardiac arrest and was put on life support for a couple of days. All of us kids, my little brother included, our families and his whole family were in the waiting room when his mom, stepdad, brother, and sister announced that they had decided to pull the plug. My heart shattered.

6: That same year, a couple of months later, my high school friend, Albani, aged eighteen, died of a heart attack. She did not deserve that, neither did Hunter. They were going to change the world.

7: This was rock bottom.

8: I heard muffled cheering as my pores filled with water. As I was lifted, everything became clear. Some people were screaming in happiness, some were clapping with their hands above their heads, some were videotaping and some started to form a line alongside the tiny little tin tub to give me a hug, people I didn’t even know. Every single person in that room had ear-to-ear smiles. And I felt peace. All of the burdens, self-diminishing, sadness, grief, and anger, all of that pain was at peace. It felt like a fresh start. A new beginning. A chance to turn all of those negative feelings into something positive.
Worst Case Scenario
By: Teddy Risley

That passing car 30 feet from the building could contain a sniper aiming at your head right now. I’m telling you, man, a supernova or a meteor could come crashing down on us at any minute, what are you doing?! Some guy. Some nobody or everybody could come into the room right now and blast you to smithereens. If not shot, you could be stabbed, or slit, or pummeled till you cannot take pummeling any more. The freakin’ floor or ceiling could collapse under or over you. Stop doing what you are doing and prepare for the worst, goddammit. Life is too short to be fulfilling something and making something out of yourself. You gotta stop and think about all these things. What are you gonna do, man? What are you gonna do?!

Horse
By: Crystal Bates

the horses stood like statues
freezing in time
like the tip of my nose
during a january breeze
the winter’s nice, because i get to stand still
but it only lasts for so long until my toes become restless
wrestling with the grips of reality, telling me i must go, go, go
but the winter maiden says slow, slow, slow down
settle down
settle into your cocoon of unhappiness
and transform the shell of what once used to be you
but what is no longer your story
tear away the dog-eared pages that you so desperately grasp onto
hoping to read something different in their pages
the words jump out and snarl like the bite of a lost and abandoned dog
the punctuation matted and dirty, making your
i mean my
skin itch and jump and writhe
i must leave this body behind
this once-forgotten dog
because loyalty has found its way back to me
and yet i closed the screen door
it seeps into the cracks of my bedroom
and the bedroom of who is loyal to me
and yet i turn away its sweet, gentle embrace
its everlasting stability, the stuff i am not used to
the stuff that is stuffed down inside of me
inside of me shines another
a new light, a balance and teeter-totter of sight and hope, the light
burns and yet warms my bones
seeping through the porous insides and synapses of my brain

Jacqueline Ebel
Shrike
By: Chris Choeun

Dust fell upon the hooded figure as the ivy-ridden doors of the dilapidated cathedral creaked open at the goading of its calloused hands. In place of a soothing scent of muddled lavender and holy oil, the all-too-familiar pungent cocktail of coppery fumes assaulted his nostrils, clouding his senses. He entered regardless, not seeking forgiveness or guidance, but eyes. With each step, the floor squelched as the bile and blood that waxed its entirety shifted around the intruding boots. Between the pews, the once busy attendees sat in prayer with flayed hands upon which sloughed jaws sat. The Seeker ignored the visceral murals as his mind hummed with the mantra that his mentors had ingrained in him since rebirth.

I. As long as there are Seekers, there is Man.

This cathedral had always been a part of the Seeker’s childhood. It was where his parents wed, where he was baptized, and where he put his father to rest twice. The ceremony should have proceeded as all others would. A plague had stolen his father’s last breath. The Seeker, only a boy back then, was never told the specific illness, but when the mangled corpse of his father was discovered devouring the innards of a clergyman, he understood the secrecy. The Scourge, a plague of beasts, had infected its way into the heart of his motherland. It was with that memory of driving a stake through his father’s skull that he would become a Seeker. It was there he would always remember the second verse.

II. As long as there is Man, there is the Scourge.

On the altar, a fellow countryman, like the many other ornaments that decorated walls of the chamber, gazed up to the broken stained glass where moonlight poured in, his body rigid from the branches of the holy tree that ran through his open ribcage. The Seeker looked upwards where a grand chandelier once hung, glittering with the sunlight that escaped from a writhing leathery storm of chittering claws and teeth. A head twisted out from the wings as it looked at the Seeker. Even amidst the folds of stretched flesh, shifting bones, and matted grey hair, the sunken-in and faint blue eyes of the priest who had always watched over the cathedral peered at the Seeker. As if recognizing the face behind the mask, the priest crept from his perch on all fours to the floor. The once holy disciple stretched his gaping maw, and with strained vocal chords, tried to howl one last sermon. The Seeker breathed the final verse, prepared to put another soul to rest.

III. Man can become beasts, but those beasts are no longer man.

Riptides
By: Erinn Beatty

How lucky are you to live next to the water, and a waterfall nonetheless! You love the water! You always have! These falls are special
They are powerful
They are beautiful
They are graceful
They are a graveyard.
More than once you come home to red and blue lights
They never learn.
Spray painted names litter the rocks
Names of those that now silently roam the neighborhood
Bodies fished out of the water
But the souls remain

City Lights
By: Maria Romanenko

The stars were below me
Twinkling in a daze
They were all so mesmerizing
I couldn’t look away
There were clusters of them:
A galaxy,
Single lonely dim ones
Shivering with fear
They twinkled and shone beside me
I couldn’t turn away
The stars were all around me
I was just too mesmerized to see
Roses of Gratitude
By: Alex Thyng

It’s no simple task to accept all of one’s self, it’s to struggle to remain true and not place our joy on the highest shelf, should we be true or wear masks for others’ health. Do we live and dance to the beat of our own drum, or spend our life under everyone else’s thumb, feeling so weary and worn despite being young? I’ve stared into my mind so many times, I’ve begun to finally read between my own lines, and let these masks of platitude unwind. I’m showing my colors and my thoughts, these pages are not flexing on the world for what I’ve got, but more to show acceptance for the things I’m not. I’m not mighty of flesh or of the backbone, I fall victim to my own emotions when I am here alone, so I bathe myself in neon within my quiet zone. I know I’m fickle and I know I’m fragile when it comes to life, but with the help of my friends and those now gone I’ve found my light, and I hope in some way to help make your worlds bright. These works aren’t perfect and I sing like I cry, letting the emotions of the words spill out from my lips and eyes, but if this is my gift to the ones I love, I will give an honest try. Hard to say thank you when it can all go so wrong, but to those who cared when I hurt this is your song, I’m sorry if the process for me took so damn long. Pages upon pages of the days now since the past, and half of my works ended up in the trash, simply because I wasn’t able to keep pace with the world spinning so fast. But this one’s for you who know my soul, these lines of my emotions are threads of pure gold, for you helped me figure a way to cut free and be bold. You held my face when I crumpled and cried, you lifted me up when my best friend had died, you cheered me on every time that I tried. So, now I write out my mind to show you I know, and I hope to bear witness to seeing you grow, and I hold all these memories of your faces so tight and close. A rose-colored boy dressed in black threads, and a book of all the memories kept in his head, my little prayers for when I lie here in my bed.
Losing You

By: Lauren Wiegers

They say you never know what you have until you lose it. But I did know.

You were the friend I’d been waiting for for a lifetime, and yet somehow, I lost you in a fraction of the time it took me to find you. You lit up my world—lit it pure gold—and for those amazing few months, I saw everything through that golden haze. You showed me again how to write as if the world depended on it. All those papers on my floor, the ones tossed haphazardly across the carpet and each other in my haste to write another? I wrote them for you. Each one dedicated to you because you were such an inspiration to me.

You changed everything like that. Things that seemed so difficult before now became so simple. Things that I had passed over before now seemed to have exquisite beauty. You helped me find a piece of myself that I had let slip through the cracks, and you fulfilled one of the deepest desires of my heart.

It was incredible. But now it’s gone. And it hurts like the world is falling to pieces because I knew exactly what I had when I had you.

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Dark and Light

By: Madeline Klaessig

I am the Dark.
I was alone for a long time.
Just me.
But then I wasn’t, because she came, and she is beautiful.
She is Light, and she brings laughter and growth.
Life and joy.
I am the Dark and I am in love with the Light.

I am the Light.
The Dark was here before me, and I can sense that he was lonely.
I can see him out of the corner of my eye.
He is always there, and I feel safe knowing he won’t ever leave.
He is mysterious and intriguing.
He brings safety and peace.
Chaos and calm.
I am the Light and I am in love with the Dark.

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One Body, One Soul

By: Jacqueline Ebel

One body, one soul, one sound of mind
Hear the beat to my drum, hear the beat to my heart
A painful truth; a beautiful lie, time
Like life, ticks away. Over before it starts

The end of a story, the start of a song
Melodic silence in a room full of fear
Time still flows, and the bell has rung
But do not weep for her, not a single tear

A body so quiet, a soul anything but still
She finds herself awake, she finds herself at home
Keeping her mind busy, she patiently waits till
Her love comes knocking, heart and scythe tinted chrome

Do not weep for her my dear, she left you all alone
Do not weep for her my dear, she’s no longer alone
Two Legacies

By: David Morris

He walked up the hill to the wreckage of what he was sure used to be some kind of vehicle. Feeling the pain in his legs from the long day’s walk again, he sat down next to the wreckage and with much difficulty breathed in slowly. He ran his fingers through the now grayed strands of his beard and opened his backpack. From it, he pulled out a rusted but still functional looking revolver. On the hilt, “Martin” was etched in gold on one side, and the phrase “always persevere” on the other. He fingered the gun in his hands for a while. He knew the gun wasn’t loaded because he had run out of bullets for it years ago, but he still kept it. He laid his head against the wreckage and started to close his eyes. “Hey.” A deep voice spoke, startling the man. Where the voice had come from stood a young man, possibly even a teenager, leaning on the wreckage to the man’s right. Like the old man, he was carrying a backpack and was wielding what appeared to be a Glock.

“I take it by the fact that you haven’t killed me yet that you want to demand something of me?” the old man said gruffly.

“Not really, although I don’t blame you for jumping to that conclusion,” the teenager responded, slowly sitting down next to him. “I haven’t talked to anyone in almost two months now, so I don’t see any point in killing a fellow survivor, especially not with how rare they are to find nowadays, y’know?”

The old man looked back down at his revolver and fiddled with it a bit more. “Guess I can’t really argue with that logic.” He looked up again at the young man. “Where do you come from, boy?”

“Somewhere in New Hampshire, can’t really remember anymore,” the young man responded. “You?”

“Portsmouth, New Hampshire,” the old man responded back. “ Appears we came from almost the same place, you and I.” Then the two of them stayed silent for a little while, as if contemplating what to say next. “So you haven’t seen anyone for a while, huh?” the old man said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah…the last person I spoke to was….Well, the person were a good friend of mine,” the young man responded.

“Oh? If it’s not too personal of a question, where’s he now?” the old man asked.

“He um…” the young man started to respond, but his face suddenly turned to a pained and distraught look. He took another moment to regain his composure, then said, “I don’t really want to talk about it, if you don’t mind too much. Let’s just say…things happen, and…” Then the young man through gritted teeth said, “…and everything’s temporary.”

The old man stopped fingering his revolver and looked up at the teenager. “Sorry, kid.” The two of them sat there in awkward silence for a while.

After a time, the young man spoke up. “What’s that you got there?” he asked.

“Just an old revolver. Not much use anymore, but I like it,” the old man replied. “I still keep it around to keep me from forgetting who I am and where I came from.” The old man laid his head back on the wreckage and started laughing quietly under his breath, every so often wheezing a bit as he did so. “Those were the good old days. Back when things hadn’t fallen apart the way they have now.” His face then immediately turned from a smile to a frown. “We had a way of life and hope of a future back then. It’s still such a shame to see how far we’ve fallen, even after all these years.” Again, the two of them stayed silent for a while.

“I never got to know those old days, y’ know,” the young man said. “But I did read about them in a few books I’ve read. How you all had a thriving society and a ‘culture,’ whatever that is.” The old man looked up at the young man again. “What was it like? Being in a ‘society,’ I mean,” the young man asked.

The old man pondered this question for a moment. “Well, it was pretty good, actually. Because everyone was given the chance to live a while, we all got to know the people around us so well we ran out of things to talk about. Can you imagine that now?”

The young man looked down and started fiddling with his newer pistol. “No, I guess I can’t.” The old man suddenly started coughing very hard. “Hey man, you’re not sick, are you?” the young man asked.

“Eeeeh, I’m not sick. Well, unless you mean sick of still being on this planet,” the old man said. “You know, I haven’t had the easiest life, kid. I’ve gone through so many trials just to stay alive, I’ve lost count. The amount of times I cheated death was…well, frankly, I’m not surprised that he’s finally caught up to me.” The old man looked back up at the teenager again. “But despite all of it, I’ve lived what I’ve deemed now as a good life. I’ve lived a life full of adventure and beauty, despite my overall situation. I took the good with the bad and owned it, and if I were to be given the chance to go through it all again, just one more time, I would certainly accept the offer.” The old man looked back down at his weapon, thinking for a moment. “Here, I want you to have this,” said the old man, handing...
the teenager his revolver.

“I thought you wanted to keep this?” the young man said, taking it. “I did but…well, something tells me you’ll have more use for it than I will soon.” The young man turned and put the pistol in his bag, then turned back to the old man. “I made that gun for a friend back before everything fell apart.” The old man then turned to his backpack and painstakingly lifted it over to the young man as well. “And take this while you’re at it. Like I said, I’m probably not going to need it in a little bit.” The young man took it cautiously from him and set it down next to his own pack. “Inside my backpack is a whole library of magazines and books I’ve gathered since the catastrophe hit. I view them as just as important as the pistol and…well, I want you to have them,” the old man said.

“I mean, I really appreciate you giving me all this stuff, but why mention the books and pistol specifically?” the young man asked.

“I want you to have the books so maybe you’ll be able to get a better idea of what it was like before everything happened. I want you to have the pistol because I want someone still living on this earth to always remember me and remember that I always persevered, right till the very end, no matter what the challenge or loss.” The young man thought about this for a moment, and then nodded his head to show that he understood. The old man’s face then turned to a tired grin. “Oh boy…you know what, after all these years of walking and scavenging, I think I need a long nap, wouldn’t you agree?” The young man nodded again, standing up. “You have a great life now, you hear kid?” the old man said.

“I hear you,” the young man said in response. “And also…good luck…with whatever’s after this, y’know?” the teenager said to the old man.

“Yes…thank you,” the old man said, starting to close his eyes. All was silent for a moment, then the young man walked away back down the hill, two guns and two legacies going along with him.

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Black Widow

By: Eric Smith

Moonlight slants down through the blinds, capturing tiny dust motes as they float in the air above my bed. Time slows as I watch Gina undress, unbuttoning her white tuxedo shirt, unpinning her pleated skirt, sliding her t-shirt over her head. Her golden hair spills out in ringlets as she sets it free. Her green eyes glint with mischievous, brazen challenge.

In the moonlight, her skin is silk and alabaster, and her naked body is breathtakingly beautiful. She has a single tattoo at her navel – a black widow the size of my thumb.

“You like it?” she asks, sliding slowly forward onto me, like a cat stretching.

“God yes,” I murmur. “You’re so f-ing beautiful.”

As she climbs atop me, staring down, I take her in my arms and the sensations are achingly delicious. I am under her spell.

We’ve spent the evening in Memphis Tennessee, at a blues bar on Beale Street, drinking frozen daiquiris in plastic beach buckets, complete with shovels, for five dollars a pop.

In the warm, buttery light, as we stared into each other’s eyes across the table, a golden sonic river flowed out from the fingertips of the guitarist.

A woman stepped up, offering a red carnation.

A gaunt man with an easel offered to draw her portrait. I am a croupier, and I earn good money.

“Do it,” I told him, not letting my eyes drop from hers.

It was a magical night.

Gina is a blackjack dealer at the Treasure Bay, where I deal dice. She is sharp-witted and sarcastic, funny, gutsy and pragmatic.

I like her. A lot.

Gina moves into my trailer, but things do not proceed smoothly. One week, I gamble away my entire paycheck, forcing her to cover all the rent. This sticks deeply in her Arkansas-bred craw. In three months, she has begun to constantly berate me, and neither arguing back nor apologizing seems to mollify her.

Mine is the only car, so we work together, commute together and live together. This is not a happy arrangement.

We are called into the office. Both Gina and I are being let go. One year after opening, Treasure Bay Casino will close its doors forever.

Not my fault – perhaps they should have kept us, I muse.

When Treasure Bay announces its first round of layoffs and we are both given the axe, it’s a cataclysmic blow to our finances and our relationship. And with all the casinos now hired to capacity, we cannot find new jobs.

In desperation, we pack our belongings into the trunk of my Nissan, aim east, and drive.

Jacqueline Ebel
Exes

By: Maria Romanenko

My heart resonates like a dry sawtoothed shard of glass against its aching metallic surface. Harsh and jagged setting my every nerve on edge. High alert coursing through my blood slipping into my cracked shut heart. Unasked memories trailing in its wake their goofy familiar faces disturbed up from the abyss snapping (open) something bone-deep within me.

A want to be cared for like that again Soft tentative touches, intense isolating gaze, warm solid security then a hurt of being cast aside, not being enough: never being enough. Rehashing whether it was entirely my fault if I made the right choice If I still am

And yet, still that wavering deep yearning straining to graze that innocent sweet honeyed nectar of infatuation…! … But too late, how could I ever forget these chains wrapping round and round and round like my roundabout thoughts squeezing tight the emotional damage of theirs transposed upon mine birthing wariness, paranoia, disgust: my new emotional kin who whisper “Who’s to say it won’t happen again? It’s all because of my naive insufferable trust And my fresh heavy lumpy rolls” Sagging, smushing, and suffocating my soul beneath them, stressing shards of fractious diamonds yet they are still fragile, shattering at the right touch, innocent compliment, slightest insinuation revealing its soft trusting vein only to be slit with betrayal yet again and the anguish begins anew

The Dreamer

By: Connor Gramstorff

He walks this cold world day by day Shadowed only by deep dismay For there is no sun here so it may seem For the man awoken from the embrace of a dream A dream once dreamt by a dreamer who lived his life with all thought spoken No need for greed no lust for token No time to slow no wounds to bleed Simply life to live but once awaken The wounds they pour no cry is spoken Life lives not for he is awoken Alive but not living in the quest for token But what hath caused to dream to fray What hath caused this deep dismay From days of emeralds and gold to those of greys and miseries untold But was the dreamer awoken or does he sleep? Perhaps these are nightmares that he does keep A gloomy contrast to days of light The brightest day needs the darkest night Perhaps the gloom shall not persist Perhaps wins day and hope and wish Perhaps they’re won these battles fought And so dreams the dreamer, perhaps not
The wind smacked forcefully into my bulky helmet as my brother sped up his motorcycle to merge in with the pace of the cars beside us. The sunset illuminated everything around us a soft golden color as we surged down the falling Seattle streets. Adrenaline pounded in my ears, yet I still stared in awe at how the city lit up in this warm adorning light. Leaning into another street, I gasped as the majestic Mt. Rainier loomed into view, the dying sunlight highlighting its every ridge, its snow-capped summit gleaming a fierce fiery color.

My brother’s shout, “Hold on!” brought me back to myself and I tightened my grip on his waist as we zoomed onto a ramp, not wanting to end up like splattered roadkill on the asphalt. Now, if I thought that riding up and down the Seattle streets was amazing, it didn’t compare to how we flew down the highway. I clung to my brother’s waist as our speed blazed into me, hell bent on displacing me from my perch. Everything seemed so real, so close, so physically present it even terrified me for a moment: the road markers swishing right on by so close I could almost feel them. I now understood why my brother preferred his motorcycle to public transportation; a motorcycle gave you a physical thrill of driving to the destination, while buses just served as an emotionless connection between two places.

Even my thoughts reflected my energized state, breaking apart and then forming back together with new ideas that slipped away as quickly as they formed. But they suddenly stilled as we burst out of another tunnel onto the free-floating Seattle-Mercer Island bridge. The ocean expanded on all sides, surrounding the two bridges, as twinkling tangerine waves lapped at the bridge’s edge. Once again, I was stunned, all coherent thoughts flying out of my mind, leaving stunned silence as we flew down the floating bridge. The waves were so close that I felt like I could reach out and touch them, but before I could another tunnel rushed around us blocking them out of my view. Instead, a wall of sound crashed into us, as the roar of millions of vehicle motors reverberated around the walls. The tunnel lights flashed all around us, reminding me of a slow-moving strobe light on a crowded, busy dance floor.

Finally, we emerged from the endless shuddering tunnel, and gently tilted off of the highway and merged onto a one-lane road surrounded by great looming pines. I shifted curiously on my perch wondering what was so special about this tiny back-road, but before long the road began to curve and snake, revealing that it crawled along the edge of an island. Every turn had a surprise hidden behind it: a view of the shimmering ocean reflecting the red sunset, a gorgeous modern cubic mansion. My brother and I dipped and swerved around these curves along with my heart dipping and diving on everything, loving the free soaring feeling every time I leaned into the curve feeling the bike dip with me. Oh, how I longed to close my eyes for just one second and envision myself as the soaring eagle, but my brother’s warning echoed in my mind, “Lean with me or the bike will be imbalanced and fall!” I guess I had to settle with just feeling and envision it later.

By the time the road wound back to the route the sun had set, taking the world’s light with it, wrapping us into a blanket of darkness, leaving only human-made lights to chase it away. It felt like years had passed from when we started our journey, but still, a little thrill of adrenaline jolted through me as we accelerated onto the highway, heading home. Clutching my brother’s waist, I used his body as a bulwark against the beating wind as I tried to sort through all of the mental snapshots I’d made throughout the trip. The tunnel’s flashing lights reflected my fractured memories as they flashed past my mind despite my desperate attempts to commit them to memory. Suddenly the tunnel’s walls fell away as we zoomed onto the floating bridge, and I gasped at the ethereal scene that surrounded me.

The moon had risen, glowing with a soft white light, illuminating the clouds’ silver lining. A huge mass to the side caught my eye, and I carefully swiveled my head back to see the mountain looming behind us. The snow glowed transluently, reflecting the gleam of moonlight, giving the mountain an otherworldly, celestial look. The undulating silver sea beside me captured its reflection, tiny wavelets stabilizing the unspeakable beauty before wobbling and breaking it apart. Above me tiny pinpricks of stars wheeled through the sky, twinkling and dancing to their own beat, filling the space between the mountain and the moon. The scene was straight out of a fantasy novel, solidifying in my mind as the idea fermented in my subconsciousness. I couldn’t stop marveling at this scene, whispering “Wow,” over and over again until my brother asked what I was saying. My emotions swelled along with my wonder until I felt like my heart would burst. I was grateful, so very grateful to be on this ride of my dreams, to have seen the buildings burn with the golden glow of the setting sun, to have felt the thrill of soaring through the curving island, to have experienced the wonder of this ethereal scenery. A tear slipped out of my eye and I cried, grateful that I had agreed to this moonlit ride down memory lane.
In the Air

By: Isabelle Laughlin

It was still summertime.

An earthy smell floated through the air.

It was wonderfully warm out.

She shivered as a crisp breeze crept around her, encasing her well-wrapped frame.

It was that buzzing noise that only comes with a hot summer day.

The sound of rustling leaves tuned out everything else, reminding her to hurry along.

She saw all things summer—at least in her mind.

Bright reds, dull oranges, and glowing yellows swirled in her eyes.

She still tasted all things that belonged to a cookout.

The taste of apples, cinnamon, and pumpkin lingered on her lips.

Slip ‘n’ slides and pools were in the yards of the houses she passed.

Scarecrows and pumpkins were scattered haphazardly about doorsteps and garden gates.

She was wearing a t-shirt and shorts.

A hat, sweater, jeans, and boots covered her from head to toe.

She bent down and touched the hot summer sidewalk.

Reaching, she ran her fingers along the chilled cement.

Denial was in the air.

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My Story’s Sequel

By: Lauren Wiegers

For every sad story I’ve written
Every poem that dripped with tears
Every song where I gave up hope
There is a sequel.

For whenever I was at my loneliest
Whenever I wondered what I was living for
Whenever I thought all my dreams were dead
There was Jesus.

It’s hard to explain
Because how does one describe a love that’s perfect?
And yet even when it’s hard to put into words
This I know . . .

That though I was undesirable, Jesus loved me anyway
That though I came to Him with nothing, He gave all for me through His death on the cross

He gave up glory and honor
To take on humility and pain
So that He could be my Savior
No aloof and distant Savior
But One Who can identify with me through all this world throws at me

Once I despaired of escaping the cycle of doubt and disappointment
But now I am set free by His love

So I have a sequel of hope
I have a sequel of identity and purpose in Jesus
I have a sequel of knowing everlasting love that hurt
To help ease my hurt

Some of my life’s stories were written in sin
Some of them were written in sorrow
Some were written in despair
But my sequel is written in faith in my Jesus

Maria Romanenko

Korey Bryant
The wind made the sand hit them like spikes, yet nothing was going to stop them from fulfilling their mission. The ocean awaited in anticipation of its lifesavers. Today Mimi was going back home, and for the four of them, it meant the beginning of their journey.

It had become a tradition for them, every Sunday after church they will go to Tela. The four of them would ride in the back of Iza’s mother’s pickup truck. It was their magic carpet. Keeper of their secrets and dreams. A place where men and women were made. The wind disheveled their perfectly gelled church hair, but they didn’t care, they were free. As the buildings transformed into trees they couldn’t help getting lost in the wonders of their country.

“I am Balam, protector of this realm, bow to me you weak mortals,” said Alicia as she stood up in a heroic stance, the wind blowing her hair for a dramatic effect.

“Shut up you idiot, come see what I brought,” said Julie as she opened her backpack revealing four cans of Red Bull and two jumbo packs of Doritos. The four of them looked at each other; mischief played in their eyes.

“Celeste do you have the package?” asked Iza.

Celeste opened her backpack to reveal her Yellow Tang, “Mimi,” in her fish tank.

“Hello, Mimi, today you are going back home to your family and friends,” said Iza, who was the one who named her Mimi. He said she reminded him of his Aunt Mimi. Not meant as a compliment.

Julie handed each of them the Red Bulls, she lifted hers “For Mimi, Queen of the Ocean.”

“For Mimi” repeated the four of them. As soon as they took a sip of the beverage, they spat it, the taste too strong for their young buds. They laughed, a moment they forever will remember. They were seven-year-olds ready to take on the world.

Church dresses and suits were quickly changed to swimsuits and trunks. The four of them were transformed by what was ahead of them, the Caribbean Sea. Kingdoms were made out of the sand, wars played out in the yellow battlefield and bodies were buried. They were merpeople, castaways, pirates, and even Cristobal Colon on their way to discover. Nothing was out of reach.

“Listen, my Balams, today we are here to return our precious Mimi to her home. If anyone has any last sentiment please speak now or forever hold your peace,” said Alicia holding Mimi in her hands. They were a little too far from the seashore, far enough that most of their torsos was covered with water. “Well, my friends, here we go” she handed Mimi to Celeste who took her out of the tank and freed her.

“Be free, Mimi!” Screamed Iza. A yellow dot swam to the end of the crystal water.

“Be free!” Screamed the four of them. A message that will remain in their hearts forever.

It is said that the scream was heard all around the world. It was a proclamation of war, a new beginning for the four of them; they would remain together. Even when they parted in different ways, they were all Balams: Ancient Mayan warriors, the Jaguar, protectors of the Land.

Julissa Castro
Growing Older
By: Kate Lord

Growing older?
There is no such thing!
Beyond the physical limits
We cannot help
Aging is a silly matter
Of one step forward,
Two steps back
Or five steps forward,
One step back
As for me, my only wish
Is that my golden years equate
To a majority of my life
Not out of well-being
Or happiness
Or all-around good times
But out of growth
And acceptance
And loving myself just for living.

Where I'm From
By: Alexander White

I’m from train whistles and car horns,
Running engines and pricking thorns.
I’m from crappy birthdays,
And never-ending nights.
I’m from a place I can’t speak or think of,
A place where hate mates with love.
Pushing boundaries as contradictories shove
Both good and bad and some but none of the above.
I am from a place that makes no sense
And since this is the case, I hate to reminisce
It’s time spent that turns dollars into cents.
There’s no need for it, where I’m from that is.
No need to discuss it at least. At least, it has made me.
That is the way it will always be staying
From birth as a baby to maybe about 18 will stay in the past.
Never in the present will it last.
Where I’m from I don’t care much for.
“Silence fell as the creature approached the house. Asuman tried to reach the window but failed; the doors and windows were covered. The storm had entrapped all the villagers, there was no way out, and she knew it. She quickly embraced Ferit. The lovers last embraced, together, they will face the creature together… End of Chapter Twenty-Four. Mr. Servus, would you like me to continue?”

“No, Gigi, I think that’s it for today.”

“Yes, please. I want to sleep well tonight. Can you finish the draft? I have to present it tomorrow.”

“No problem, Sir. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Gigi,” said Mr. Servus as he went into the grid. Flushing his memories was always painful, but it helped him concentrate. He needed to be at his best for tomorrow.

The next morning Servus’ leg moved at the speed of light. These meetings had become a routine for him already; yet after twenty years as a writer, he couldn’t help feeling nervous; this was the end of two decades of hard work. The end of the Zenn series, and, like always, his editor rejoiced in making his stomach hurt.

“You have written this before,” said Alexis as he laid down the draft on his desk.

“What do you mean? Of course, I haven’t?” replied Servus with a puzzled look.

“What you gave me is a recompilation of all your work; there is nothing new here. Give it a read and come back next week with something more original.” Alexis tapped his wrist. “Gigi, schedule an appointment next week with Mr. Servus.”

“Yes, Sir. You have Friday morning free. Would that work for you?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, Sir. Appointment confirmed.”

“Well, that’s it, Servus, you may leave now, and remember this is your grand finale. We want something that will make the readers remember you.”

“Sure,” said Servus as he exited the office.

He had been working on this book for months. Where were the clever ideas that came so easily to him before? Where were the eloquent words that enamored his readers, or the marvelous plot twist that promised a roller-coaster of entertainment and enlightenment to all who picked up one of his novels? He had been relying on Gigi more than usual, but he couldn’t stop. Using Gigi was the definition of a bestseller. Besides, he didn’t feel guilty; everyone used Gigi nowadays.

As he opened his house’s front door, Servus tapped his wrist.

“Welcome, Sir. How did the meeting go?”

“No, Gigi, we need to restart the book; create new scenarios, and avoid using any common plot twist.”

“Yes, Sir. Would you like me to download your ideas to have a better understanding of what you want?”

Servus looked out the patio window. It was warm outside; summer had arrived early. No clouds, no smoke; he loved April. The government had declared April as the green month, which meant no factories running. It was part of their new green campaign, but they all knew people were still dying due to the pollution.

“Yes, Gigi, but do it fast, and also kill Ferit at the end. Make it an epic death.” Servus placed a glass filled with water on the table and laid down on the couch, letting the grid swallow him.

Waking up was always the hard part. First came the thirst, and then the disorientation. With time, it took the average middle-aged human about five minutes. For children and teens nowadays, it only took thirty seconds. They were born with it. But for humans Servus’ age, they had to install it.

Servus drank the water and tapped his wrist. “Gigi, how is the draft coming?”

“Very well, Sir. You are a fantastic writer.”

“Thanks, Gigi.”

“Yes, there is a new system update. Would you like me to begin with it?”

“What’s in the new update?”

“GIGI 13.1 includes bug fixes, fixes issues that could prevent restoring memories, memory space upgraded, fixes a security issue for third-party apps, language development and storytelling upgraded, fix.”

“All right, Gigi. Update and then finish the draft.”

“Updating commenced. Good night, Sir.”

“Goodnight, Gigi,” he said, letting himself get lost in the grid once more.
“We’re still unsure of the cause of his condition; you should prepare yourself for the worst in case he doesn’t make it.” As a parent, you never want to hear this from a doctor. The newborn stage is already terrifying on its own. You constantly worry you’re doing something wrong or if your child is okay. I still remember waking up in the middle of the night just to make sure he was still breathing as an infant. Once my son, Taymond, was two weeks old, he was admitted to Boston Children’s Hospital. Most can only imagine the now added stress I had on top of learning how to care for him already. Your child being in the hospital is heartbreaking and takes a huge emotional toll on you.

I had just turned nineteen three months prior to giving birth to Taymond. He was the perfect infant with the softest skin I’d ever felt. He slept like an angel and rarely ever cried. He had the chunkiest cheeks and legs that I’d ever seen. He passed all his generic newborn screenings. I received the authorization to bring him home with me when I was discharged from the maternity ward.

Life was different with a newborn, and I was still adjusting to my new lifestyle. We had his first few appointments with the pediatrician and everything looked good, until our standard two-week-old check-up, when the doctor realized that he was breathing extremely fast. The standard respiratory rate for an infant is between thirty to sixty breaths per minute and his was over eighty. She decided it would be best to check his oxygen level and found that it was steadily in the low eighties when it should have been above ninety-seven.

My heart was pounding out of my chest. The nurses tried to keep me calm as they grabbed oxygen tanks. The pediatrician informed me that Taymond was in severe respiratory distress and needed to be brought to a hospital. They called an ambulance and transported us to our local emergency department. The ride there was dreadful and felt like it took hours, although the hospital was just minutes down the road. I could feel my body shaking with nerves, but I couldn’t control it.

Once we arrived at the hospital, we were immediately brought back into a room. There were many people there, ranging from medical assistants to doctors. They ordered X-rays and attached him to monitors. We sat waiting for results for almost two hours before we heard anything back. All his test results came back negative and it was decided that they would transfer us to Boston Children’s Hospital for further testing and observation.

We pulled into the hospital emergency bay around dusk on a cool afternoon. The paramedics wheeled my son in on a stretcher and checked us in. We were put in a room at the end of a hallway that looked like it went on forever. It smelled of chemicals, as if they had cleaned the room just before we got there. A cardiologist was the first to come in the room to examine him. She introduced herself and shook my hand. Her fingers were freezing cold like ice cubes. Doctors from all different specialties came to examine him, always accompanied by the attending emergency room doctor. After more negative test results, it was decided that he’d be admitted to the hospital’s inpatient units to find the cause of his condition.

A wide variety of things were tested for, but nothing gave us an answer. One week had gone by and it was starting to feel like they were keeping us for no reason. This whole time I had believed that this was all a mistake and that Taymond was perfectly fine. Then reality hit me hard.

I was playing with Taymond in his bed, when his whole body went...
stiff. His face began to slowly turn blue, and then to purple. Alarms started going off from what sounded like every direction. The hospital staff came rushing into the room, and as I stood there frozen, a nurse pulled me away by my arm. I watched the numbers on his cardiac monitor drop lower and lower until eventually, they all hit zero. I tasted a distinctive salty flavor from the tears streaming down my face as I watched them resuscitate my two-week-old son. I thought to myself how unfair this was. Taymond didn’t deserve any of this; he’d just been brought into this world.

After their amazing work, they were able to bring Taymond back. He was now in much graver condition than he was before. We tried every possible intervention to get him breathing on his own, but unfortunately, nothing was working. Then after another month and a half, Taymond’s father and I agreed that it would be in his best interest to have a Tracheostomy placed. After the surgery, his health had a tremendous turnaround. He was thriving and the healthiest he’d been in as long as we could remember.

We remained in the Intensive Care Unit for quite some time as Taymond was recovering from his procedure. It took a long time to safely get him off the addictive medications he was put on to sedate him after his cardiac arrest. The more drugs we got him off of, the more I could see my healthy baby boy coming back. His transformation from the time we heard the words, “We’re still unsure of the cause of his condition, you should prepare yourself for the worst in case he doesn’t make it,” to the day that he was officially taken off all his medications was tremendous.

We received the news that Taymond has a rare genetic condition called CILFAHD Syndrome. It only affects thirty-five people in this world today. We felt relief to finally have answers. Shortly after receiving his diagnosis, he was cleared to come home from the hospital for the first time in over five months.
Okay, so picture this:
A shy kid grows into a confident young man
Pretty simple, right?
Okay, now picture this:
This confident young man is about to turn 21, and he starts getting a
thought somewhere in his head
One he’s repressed for years
He’s comfortable in his self, but nearly uncomfortable in his skin
Don’t worry, we’re getting there!
Okay, now… picture this:
One day, this young man decides to settle that thought once and for all
He needs answers, and goddammit, he’s gonna get them!
So he goes to a store and unfortunately it’s pretty crowded that night
But shame be damned, he’s following through!
He finds the clothing section and there, he finds this black crop top
He sees the seed of an answer
He makes his purchase, runs home, and sneaks into the bathroom
One arm at a time, he’s ready to face himself in a new light
He’s ready to inch closer to his personal truth
The top is on, his hair is down, his beard is gone, and his eyes are new
He tilts his head up, looks himself in the mirror, and he realizes…
He got a size too big.
Silently, he takes off the top, puts it back in the bag, retreats to his room,
and crawls under the covers… confused and defeated.
Pretty wild, right?

† † †

Congratulations, Class of 2020!
Proof