

"Showcasing the beautiful power of written and visual art forms."

ISSUE # 10, FALL 2025



GABBY & MIN'S

Literary Review

**POETRY BY
GREGORY
O'NEILL
NOVEMBER**

**ART BY
JULIE
EPP
IFOLDED THESE
FOR YOU**

**FICTION BY
AYSHE
DENG TASH
THE HAZELNUT
SWIRL**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY
GAEL
BLAKE
LES FLUERS
AUTUMN ROAD**



GABBY & MIN'S
Literary Review

ISSUE #10, FALL 2025

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Cherished Readers,

As autumn settles in with its familiar hush and golden edges, I'm delighted to welcome you to the **Fall 2025 issue of Gabby & Min's Literary Review**. This season has a way of slowing the world down just enough for us to take notice—of what has changed, what remains, and what deserves to be carried forward.

Issue #10 reflects that spirit. The works gathered here explore shifts both subtle and profound: stories of memory resurfacing, poems that recognize beauty in transition, photographs that hold onto fleeting light, and art that captures the quiet intensity unique to fall. Each contribution brings its own depth, and together they form a collection rooted in reflection, honesty, and creative resonance.

Reaching our tenth issue feels both surreal and deeply meaningful. This publication continues to grow because of the dedicated voices who share their art and the readers who return with curiosity and heart. I'm continually grateful for your support and for the community that has formed around these pages.

I hope this issue offers warmth as the days cool, perspective as the leaves turn, and inspiration for the season ahead.

With boundless gratitude and warmest autumn wishes,



Sage Delio, Editor-In-Chief, *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*

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CHERRY, BITTER

CLS SANDOVAL

She didn't come for Christmas
like she promised
and I tried to understand
I made our nana's cherry pie

Like the bitter cherry tree supports
bees, hummingbirds, squirrels
my sister supports
her dogs, her boyfriend, her new outdoor life in Astoria

She wants me to visit her

I say it's hard with the kids
to find time off from work
there's no room in her bus
for our family of four to stay

I ask her if she will come
for Christmas in the future

She says she wants to find a house
as if she will plant roots
like the cherry trees near her bus
rather than tumble away like
the trees' fall fruits

She wants to get out
our late mother's Christmas decorations from storage
the ones that match the deep red and green
of the bitter cherry tree so she can host us all

She dreams of roots
while slipping away
with the leaves of the cherry tree
in the winds between autumn and winter

NOVEMBER

GREGORY O'NEILL

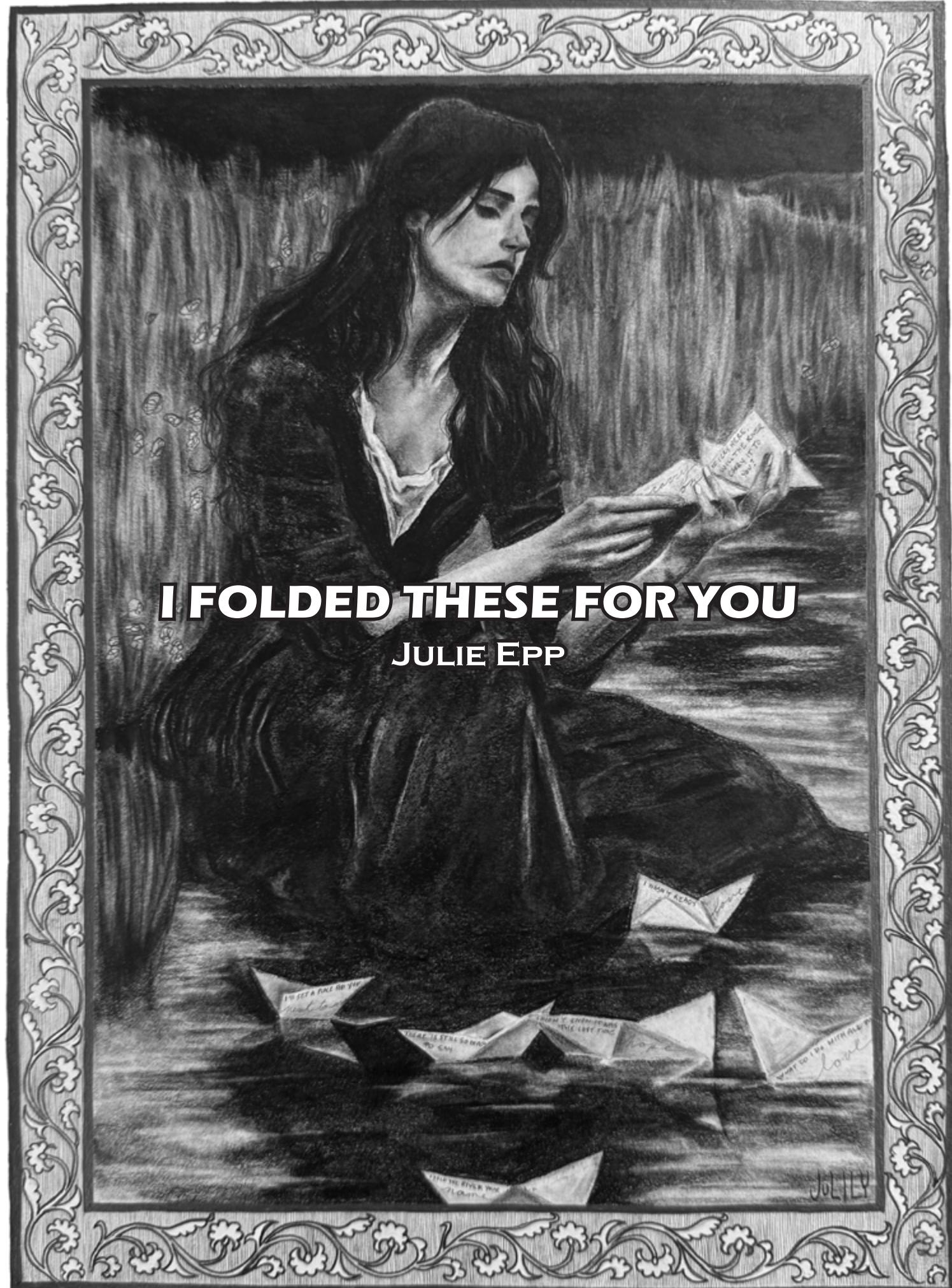
On clear November nights the pond
glasses over, a brittle mirror of lamps.
I press my palm to cold air and feel
the small glass seams of the world.

I want to break thin ice, reach
for the stitched beads of frost that hold
each distant candle in the field. My fingers
go numb at the rim; the mud beneath is frozen silk.

Tiny things curl into themselves at my touch,
unsuspecting of my reaching, of any part
they play beyond the shallow pane
of this iced-over world. On the bank,
hoarfrost maps the branches in white filigree —
they tremble not from December's teeth
but from my soft, clumsy tread and the pull
of a moon too near for comfort.

Above, stars are cold and unperturbed,
ungiven to our small calendars of grief.
I count the thin days, weigh my options;
I want to look without needing signs,
to find the small stitches that keep
the dark from unthreading us entirely.

At the path's end the old porch light hums low,
its halo a dollar-store sun that warms nothing
but the memory of hands once briefly held.



THE PICTURE ON THE WALL

RORY BROUILLARD

TW: Suicide

Rain pattering on stone, bouncing off the jackets of Jason and his father, Mark, as they stand lifeless over his mother's grave. Fresh, loose dirt settles into place, as flower petals are torn off one by one by rain drops. Jason's robin egg button up has turned grey from the water, as his chestnut hair droops in front of his eyes, stuck to his eyelids. The sky is an ironic funeral grey with clouds pushing the dark emptiness into Mark's sunken eyes. Neither of them move for two hours in fear of disrupting the newly resting.

The Atwood's kitchen appears as it hasn't been cleaned in years, with tinfoil casseroles piled on coffee-stained counters. His dad sits with a glass of room temperature bourbon that has been untouched since they first came back from the funeral. Jason remains in his funeral wear opening and shutting every cabinet. Dishes thrown around on every surface clink as Jason brushes passed. The cabinets are all empty, with not a singular mug in sight. Jason turns to the tinfoil pans and shuffles through the aluminum.

"It's always all the same. If it's not potatoes, it's meatloaf and green beans," Jason groans as he falls into the chair next to his father. "Can we please just order something?" Jason grabs the still bourbon glass and swigs it down, before coughing half of it back up. Jason snatches the keys out of the fruit bowl that only holds junk and stands up.

"Come on, I'll drive," Jason says as he pats his dad on the back. His dad smiles, slightly, for the first time since his wife's passing.

"I call shotgun," his dad yells laughing and chasing Jason out the door.

Their bodies squint as they rush out into the rain and towards their 10-year-old 1986 Subaru Wagon. Jason slides in as his dad lands on the seat, slamming the door shut.

"FUCK!" he shouts as he squeezes his right hand, rocking back and forth. Blood runs down his dad's arm as its lathered into his skin through his commotion.

"Are you ok?" Jason says frantically, throwing himself towards the passenger seat. "I think I have napkins somewhere." Jason throws pink registration slips and insurance papers around like confetti.

"Jason," his dad says failing to grab his attention.

"Jason." Nothing.

"JASON," he finally shouts, stopping Jason in his tracks. "Look, its already stopping." His dad lifts his hand as the blood stream has turned into a couple drops resting on his fingernail.

Jason remains frozen, as a movie plays behind his eyes.

A bathtub pouring out with tainted, pink water as a hand droops out from the top.

Jason rapidly blinks, burning the film before it fully develops. "Sorry, it's just...the blood." A singular tear falls into his lap. "It was everywhere."

"I know, I know. I see it every time I close my eyes," says his dad as he puts a comforting hand on Jason's shoulder. "Here. Hand me the keys and I'll go pick up a pizza. You've had a long day so just take some time to rest." His dad reaches out a hand for the keys, as Jason slouches

them in his palm.

The sound of the engine whispers through the front window as Jason plops on a couch. The room around him looks as if it has never been touched. Endless trinkets and pictures on end tables and fireplace ledges, coated and preserved with dust.

Jason almost levitates off the couch, as its stiffness rejects Jason's mold into the cushions. His earbuds dangle from his ear with muffled music that can be heard across the room by no one. His mother's favorite song, "Dancing in the Moonlight", plays on repeat since her passing last week.

Jason hears a ringing in the distance but is unsure of his ear's accuracy. He removes an earbud and looks around before the side table rings again. The phone.

"Hello?" Jason questions, as no one has called him in months.

"Don't sound too excited to hear from me!"

"Caitlin," is all Jason can get out as his throat feels suffocated, letting the silent static speak for a minute. He never thought that she even knew his name, let alone his number. She rarely talked to him, despite asking for help with homework.

"Hello?" Caitlin says.

"Now who's confused," Jason laughs dryly, immediately regretting every life choice that has led him to this moment. What is he saying? Caitlin laughs, probably sarcastically so he doesn't feel bad. "Ummm anyways, what's up Caitlin?"

"I just wanted to check on you. I haven't seen you in school all week and I've missed you. I hope it's ok, Ryan gave me your number."

"Oh, uh, really? I didn't think anyone would notice."

"Of course, I've noticed! Calc has been so boring without you there." Jason sat up a little bit taller and attempted to bring his voice down an octave or two.

"That's good to hear. Well, uh..." Jason becomes frantic causing his voice to crack. "Well, not good for you guys but, you know, good to know that I am not boring." Jason smacks his palm to his face, and he slides off the couch to the floor.

"So where have you been?" she said trailing off because she already knew the answer.

"I've been home. My, uh ..."

"Yeah, I heard about your mom. I'm so sorry you had to go through that. I'm here if you need anything," she says bringing genuine comfort to Jason for the first time since his mom passed.

"Thanks," he says giving a soft smirk he hopes she can feel over the phone.

"Well, if you need anything call me and I really hope to see you back soon!"

"I'll definitely let you know," he gets out before the line goes dead.

Jason allows the phone to slink to the ground with the cord, as he remains leaning against the couch with his eyes locked with the popcorn ceiling.

The door slams and the sound of scrapping boots begins in the front hall.

"Rain is getting pretty bad out there. Mud puddles all over the lawn," his dad says, continuing to rub the mud on the rug. He carries two large pizza boxes in his palm, using his elbow to choke a coke two-liter as it attempts to slip out. "I figured we could both use a pizza of our own." His dad continues into the front room, where Jason remains staring blankly at the ceiling as if sleeping with his eyes open. "Jason?"

Jason quickly shakes snapping out of his trance.

“You ok?” his dad questions.

“Yeah, sorry. A friend just called.”

“Ryan?”

“Uh, no. Someone else,” Jason says as his voice shakes as he stares into the carbonation boiling in the coke bottle.

“Well, it’s time to eat.” His dad moves to the open entry way to step into the kitchen. He pauses with one foot hanging in the still air. Jason is back stuck to the ceiling. “You coming?”

Jason pushes himself up of the ground.

“Yup, sorry,” Jason follows his dad with a little more intention in every step.

The car’s brakes come to a creek and halt outside Cleve-Hill High School. His dad pulls on the parking brake and looks uncertain towards Jason.

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back?” he says with worry.

Jason slings his bag over his shoulder with one foot already out the car door.

“Gotta start at some point.” He slams the door, dragging his brown dirt converse across the blacktop.

“Call me if you need anything. Love you,” his dad shouts but is drowned out as Jason stuffs an earbud on each side. He slips through the cracks of the hallway, sucking his elbows into his ribcage to avoid collision. He appears smaller than when he started here three years ago. His black, baggy jeans and oversized Green Day shirt swallow him whole, as he shrinks more and more with every step. He keeps his head down to avoid eye contact, as he is tossed from side to side. Jason has

come to know faces by their shoes. A few feet ahead, pink converse with self-embroidered flowers on each side. Caitlin.

A ray of light seeps out through her pores and creates a barrier as she glides down the hall. Her light, chestnut hair that appears weightless to the touch falls into place with every stride she takes. Jason usually thought highlights meant someone was hiding something, usually greying roots, but Caitlin, with her there was nothing to hide. She wore a grey Led Zeppelin t-shirt that cutoff right at the waistline. Plain, black running shorts to show no effort, except Caitlin never had to put effort in to begin with. Genuinely beautiful and beautifully genuine.

Should he go up to her? Walk around her? Look up and smile? Pretend he doesn’t hear or see her? Ask her about her favorite Led Zeppelin song, but he knew she wouldn’t know a single one.

“Jason!” Caitlin calls, making the decision for him.

Jason peaks up from under the black beanie he used to appear as just a shadow following with the crowd. He meets her topaz eyes that glisten as bright as her smile. Before he can think of what to say, Caitlin embraces him as if they’ve been friends for years.

“I didn’t know you were coming back so soon!” She pulls away but hangs onto Jason’s shoulders seemingly lost in his warmth.

“I didn’t think so either, but I didn’t want to be the reason you failed calc,” he says sarcastically.

Jason finds himself lost and drawn in like a moth to a flame, unconsciously ignoring everything she says.

“Well, I’ll see you in third period!” Jason hears as he unfreezes as her hand finally drops from his shoulder. “And please, let me know if you need anything!”

“Thanks,” he says to no one as Caitlin is already gone with the crowd.

Jason sits at a desk so old and rotten; it creaks with every shift of his weight as he writes across his page of notes.

"Ok," says Mr. Abbott, who looks as if he only chose English education because he had to declare a major before junior year in order to keep playing soccer. "Read the next couple chapters of *Jane Eyre* and come in with your thoughts on how this novel can be seen as early feminism." Shuffling grows throughout the classroom, as pens and books fall to the floor from the few that fell asleep in the back of first period. Jason slugs up from his desk, as Chris, wearing the same sweat stained football jersey he wore every day, passes in front of him.

"Hey Chris," he says holding his breathe.

Chris turns to stop, scanning Jason up and down, but continues out the door in silence.

"So, Jason," says Ryan opening a Blue Light on the glass patio table and taking a long, drawn-out sip before passing it to Chris next to him, "when are you finally going to let us at your place?"

Jason shakes his head to Chris, waving off the beer now being passed to him.

"Um..."

"That's all you ever say," Chris says cutting him off with a long sigh. "It's always 'my dad says no,' 'my dad said not tonight,' 'my dad this and my dad that.' You gotta knock off this 'daddy's boy' shit and think for yourself."

"It's not just that," Jason says sitting up taller and sinking lower simultaneously. "It's just, my mom..."

"So, who is it? Is it your mom or your dad? Which one are you fucking?" Ryan says laughing and ripping the bottle out of Chris's hand.

Jason sits in the silence and still air as mosquitoes buzz around and suck the life out of his arm. They just don't get it.

"Come on, Jace, he's just joking with you," Chris says, as Ryan is still wheezing with laughter.

"Yeah, but seriously why don't we head over to your place?" Ryan finally gets out followed by a yeasty belch.

"Maybe another time."

The bell rings as Jason steps onto the linoleum floors of the lunchroom. The cacophony of chatter pulses through his ears as his eyes dart around for an empty seat. A table sits alone in the far corner, untouched due to the close proximity to the trash can.

Jason plants himself at the table, hoping to be unseen and undetected by anyone. He crunches down to become invisible to the cliques around him.

"This seat taken?" Jason looks up and Caitlin stands illuminated by a halo of sun peaking in through the window.

"It's all yours," he says continuing to pick at his mashed potatoes. She gracefully sits down as two golden strands line the side of her face. **She looks behind her at a group of girls, her friends, as they study Jason and Caitlin and discuss in whispers.**

"So how is it being back at school?" she says oblivious to the lack of life surrounding them.

"It's fine."

"Are you happy to see all your friends?"

Jacob looks around spinning his head like an owl.

"Yeah, clearly I'm Mister Popular," he says nervously laughing.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know...never mind." He drops his face back towards his

potatoes, drowning himself out. "Just a joke."

"So, any plans after school?" she says.

"Not really, might fuck around and wrestle a bear," he says sitting up a little taller.

Caitlin covers her mouth almost spitting her food out with laughter, most likely from secondhand embarrassment. Jason laughs quietly with her, unsure if hers is real.

"I've missed you," she says silently under her breath, but Jason could easily read her lips after months of staring at them.

The bell rings soon after as organized chaos erupts around. Chris walks towards Jason with a group of other sweaty jocks falling behind. Jason feels a breeze of tension as Chris's arm just barely scraps his back. Ryan is directly behind Chris, tall with dark greasy hair and a gold chain that has left his neck partially green, yanks Jason to the ground by his hood. Jason falls in an instant, grabbing hold of his neck to try and breath. The boys laugh, high fiving each other, and walking away as if nothing had just occurred.

Jason remains kneeling on the ground, coughing for air. Caitlin rushes over and plants herself down next to him.

"What was that?" she says with urgency. "I thought Chris and Ryan were your friends?"

Finally able to get some air, Jason replies, "Key word: were." He pushes himself off the ground, rejecting Caitlin's hand. This girl, THE girl, just watched him get taken down in one pull. There's no going back up from here.

"Are you ok?"

"Sorry, I've got to get to class," he says quickly grabbing his bag and speed walking away, as his beanie falls a little more over his eyes.

The last bell rings and Jason is already half way down the front steps, eagerly missing every other in his descent.

"Jason," a sweet, soft voice says as light pebble stone taps follow him. He tries to ignore it, still embarrassed from before, but his feet are stuck like tar on the steps. It's Caitlin. All the shame blows away as her gentle hand taps his shoulder.

"I wanted to check in on you. That was pretty rough at lunch," she says.

"I'm fine," he shrugs.

"What did you mean by 'key word: were?' Are they not your friends? Ryan was the one that gave me your number, because I knew he was your best friend."

"You know, things happen."

"Well, I'm here if you want to talk about it." Her kind eyes made him want to tell her everything. He could fall into them, curled up and comforted. He wanted to tell her how they were best friends, but he was slowly shut out. How his dad wouldn't let him have people over. How his friends started to call him names. How he finally gave in and invited them over, leading to his dad screaming at them and calling the cops for trespassing. How alone he was. How he wanted an escape. How she could be his escape.

"Thank you, Caitlin," he says holding everything in with a smile. She went in for a hug but was stopped by the sound of Jason's dad laying on the horn.

"Come on bud," his dad shouts from the car.

"See you later," Jason says quickly walking away, as Caitlin's friends swarm around her.

Jason tries to open the car door but his hand slips from the sweat covering his palm.

"Who was that?" his dad says after Jason was able to open the door with a little better grip.

"Who?" Jason says obviously trying to act oblivious.

"That girl. I've never seen you with a girl before."

"Oh, she's just a girl from calc."

"That's a pretty long name if you ask me," his dad says laughing at his own joke. "How was your first day back though?"

"Fine."

The rest of the car ride was silent, the only sound was of the wind breaking through the still air from the windows. Jason sat staring out and up at the slightly clouded sky, as he hadn't been able to get the thoughts and voices out of his head since Caitlin drew them to the surface with her eyes.

"Dad," Jason calls as he creeks open the front door and squeezes through.

"I'm in here," his dad shouts from the kitchen. Jason walks like a stranger in his own home, hiding half of himself behind the entryway. "What's up?" his dad says looking up from whatever meaningless mail he was flipping through. His dollar store reading glasses that he didn't really need hung from his nose as the arms wrapped around his balding head. His nightly glass of bourbon sat still, condensation dripping down the sides.

"I was just wondering..." Jason pauses as if he lost all ability to speak.

"You were wondering..."

"Could I hang out with Ryan and Chris tonight?"

"Of course!" his dad says, as if it was stupid of him to ask in the

first place. "Just be home by 8, because it is a school night. There's \$20 in my wallet if you need money for food."

Jason still held his breath, still anxious of what might come.

"Well, um, would they be able to come over here," Jason says in a whisper that not even the thoughts in his head could hear.

His dad removes his glasses to the table and turns his head in a semi-robotic manner. "What did you say?"

"Um...would Ryan and Chris be able to come here tonight?" Jason starts to ramble on to the floor, "they've stopped inviting me..." and "they keep asking..." and "I want my friends back..." A glass shatters stopping the tangent that he was on as he finally looks up. His dad slowly opens his clenched fist, releasing a river of blood and shattered shards from his bourbon glass. Silence sat in the room by a thread getting looser with every second.

"What do I tell you every time you ask to have friends over?" his dad says calmly, shaking glass out of his hand.

"Mom doesn't want people around because she's sick," Jason replies quietly, shrinking himself down.

"Mom CAN'T have people around because she's sick," his dad shouts pushing the table away from him as it rocks towards the floor. "Your mom is SICK, and you want to have your friends over? You're such an ungrateful asshole. Do you even give a shit about your mom?" His dad stormed out, not even realizing the tears streaming from Jason's eyes.

Jason lays in his bed underneath his Kiss poster, getting lost in the constellations of star stickers stuck to his ceiling. "Dancing in the Moonlight" plays through a half-busted radio as he sinks further into his bed, allowing his plaid comforter to form around his body. The phone rings downstairs but after one ring it stops.

"Jason," his dad shouts up the stairs. "Someone is on the phone for you." Jason sits waiting, hoping his dad tells whoever called that he's not there.

"I think it's calc girl," causes Jason to shoot up hoping that Caitlin didn't hear the term "calc girl" through the receiver. He stumbles down the stairs and rips the phone out of his dad's hand.

"Hello," Jason says with a slight voice crack that bounces off the walls and rings in his ears.

"Hey Jason!" Caitlin says immediately silencing the ringing in his head. "Sorry we didn't get to talk more after school."

Why is she telling Jason sorry? He was the one who rushed out of school. It was his dad that shouted at him, embarrassing him on his first day back.

"You're all good! Sorry, my dad is annoying sometimes."

"It was sweet that he picked you up! It seems like he cares about you."

"Yeah, I guess he does."

"Anyways, I was wondering if you would want to come over to do some homework with me?"

Jason stutters inaudible gibberish, attempting to get out a simple "Yes." Before he can even get his thought out, she's reciting her address followed by "see you soon!" and a flat telephone line. Jason's dad doesn't even wait a second before jumping in with, "Was I right? Was it calc girl?"

"Yeah, it was," Jason says pushing down his enthusiasm. "Uh, we just have an assignment to work on. Could I borrow the car?" His dad hands him the keys and goes through the usual run down.

"Be home by 8. Don't crash the car. Use your manners. Have fun." The have fun always seemed to get stuck at the top of his mouth as he

hacked it up like an unwanted hairball.

Jason slows down and parks along the white picket fence that lines the picture-perfect yard. The grass is cut evenly, as if someone trimmed it with a ruler and nail clippers. A large oak tree shoots up in the dead center with leaves falling with every whistle of wind. They're so perfectly colored that Jason thinks about bending down to see if they're real but decides not to after feeling a crunch under his converse. He walks up the pathway to the wooden door of the beige paneled house. He lifts his arm to knock but misses as Caitlin has already swung it open with a smile.

"Hey!" Caitlin says with joy in her shoulders. "You can come on in. My mom's only request is that you take your shoes off at the door." Caitlin backs away, leaving a warm breeze that draws Jason in. He attempts to kick off his converse, but after struggling for two minutes too long, he gives in, bends down, and undoes the laces.

"Cait is your friend here?" a voice calls out from the kitchen. "I made some snacks for you guys if you would like."

"Thanks Mom!" Caitlin says turning to Jason. "Are you hungry?"
"A snack would be nice."

"Perfect, I'll bring them up in a minute," Caitlin's mom says almost magically appearing from the kitchen. The resemblance of the two was uncanny, as her mom gave a glimpse into Caitlin's future. "Thank you for having me," Jason says reaching out a clammy palm and immediately regretting it. What seventeen-year-old shakes someone's hand? He only just became friends with Caitlin and he's shaking her mom's hand. Are they friends? Is she just using him for homework? She did seem awfully excited to see him. So, they're friends. But shaking hands?

He was about to pull away when her mom smiled and softly took

his hand.

"It's so nice to finally meet you! I've heard so much about you!" Does Caitlin talk about him at home? Or is that just something you say when you've never heard of someone and suddenly, they're at your front door?

Caitlin begins to float up the stairs, bouncing on the sheep like carpet steps with Jason nervously tiptoeing up behind her. Her door is the first on the right, creaked open and with sunlight shining through like the gates of Heaven. The walls are painted pale blue with lights lining the boarder and trinkets thoughtfully placed throughout the room. Caitlin falls into place on her bed on fluffy, white sheets. Jason pauses in the doorway, unable to move forward feeling as if an invisible barrier is blocking his way.

"You can come in," Caitlin says with a friendly laugh.

"Uh, yeah I just, uh," Jason stumbles over one word after another. Caitlin looks up to meet his eyes, as they break through the barrier in front of the door.

"You can sit next to me," she says gently sliding over and leaving behind a pastel blue pillow resting on the headboard. She reaches to the side lifting her backpack to the bed, throwing it next to where Jason placed his.

"So have you looked at the homework yet?" he says fishing for his notebook through layers of folded up paper.

"Yeah, I started a few in class, but figured I could definitely use your help." Caitlin hides her paper slightly with the edge of her arm. Out of the corner of his eye, Jason sees every problem is already done.

"Just a few? Looks like you have them all done." Caitlin's face turns red, and Jason can feel the heat coming off. Why did he say that? He never thought she knew what embarrassment was.

"Uh, yeah," she says tripping over the words Jason had left out before. "I like to do them in class but they're almost always wrong, so I was hoping you could help me, and you know I don't know," she rambled on trying to catch her breathe.

Jason attempts to catch the words pouring out, "I get it, I do the same." He flips open his notebook, showing Caitlin his completed work with pages of notes. As they both laugh to ease any embarrassment, Caitlin's mom walks through the door. She's carrying a platter of cheeses, cucumbers, apples, wheat thin crackers, pickles, and a jar of jam.

"How's the studying going?" she quietly interrupts, placing the platter on the bench at the end of the bed.

"It's going well," Caitlin says with her typical soft smile, looking gently over at Jason.

"I'm so glad to hear! And Jason, I just wanted to say, I'm sorry about your mom. Caitlin mentioned what happened," she says with an empathetic gaze. He has seen a lot of those recently from almost everyone he sees, but this was different. This, like Caitlin's, had care behind the eyes. Everyone else looked at him as if he was a young boy who lost his favorite toy at a park. This look had true heart break.

"Mom," Caitlin says as if protecting Jason.

"I'm sorry," she says returning to mom mode. "I'll let you get back to it." She places her hands in the back of jeans pockets and walks out the door.

"I'm sorry about that," Caitlin says shuffling through the papers she's sprawled on her bed, pretending to look for something.

"It's really fine. No one's even really taken the time to ask about my mom. Well, except you the other day," Jason says running over his words to take attention away from his reddening face.

Caitlin and her mom were the only two to ask about his mom and how he was doing. He would say that everyone walked on eggshells and glass around him, but that would require people to get close enough to hit the sharp pieces scattered around. His friends were gone before the glass even broke and his dad returned to work before the pieces even hit the ground.

"I'm here if you want to talk," she says placing her palm on the back of his knuckles and unlocking his soul with her ocean eyes.

"My mom was depressed," Jason blurts out without even thinking. "Like really depressed, her whole life." He didn't know where this came from. He had never been able to tell anyone this, but Caitlin was able to bring it out of him within just a couple days of being friends. "She never left the house, let alone her bed." He finally looked back up and wasn't met with fear or confusion, but empathetic eyes that wrapped around him like the comfort of his mother's hugs.

"She killed herself," was the last thing he got out before collapsing into Caitlin's arms, sobbing. Caitlin ran her fingers through his curly hair, as her shirt soaked up the running river from his eyes.

A few minutes go by and suddenly Jason realizes he's crying in the arms of this girl, THE girl. He pops up and sniffs everything back in.

"I'm sorry," he says frantically, trying to seem cool still.

"You don't have to apologize for anything Jason," she says reaching for his hand again. "You shouldn't have to apologize to your friends."

"You should tell Ryan and Chris that," Jason laughs trying to make the conversation more lighthearted.

"You keep saying stuff like that, but you still haven't told me what you mean?"

Jason takes a deep breathe in. "Ryan and Chris were never allowed

over...well no one was ever allowed over," he finally says keeping his head down, picking at his hang nails. "My dad never allowed me to have anyone over, because of my mom. They didn't understand that and eventually stopped inviting me to things. I finally gave in to them, just hoping I could get my friends back, but my dad called the police on them for trespassing. That was the last I heard from them, or the last time I heard from them besides when they push me to the ground and laugh."

"What about when your mom died?" Cailin says with concern in the back of her throat.

"They didn't even leave a message or give me an 'I'm sorry' when they saw me at school. Honestly, I don't even know if they know what happened."

They sit in silence for a little longer, both unsure of what to say. Why did he spill his guts? Also did she call him her "friend?" Was he friend zoned and why is this what he is worrying about right now? He rambled about his depressed mother and how he was dumped by all his friends, and he's worried about being friend-zoned?

"Uh so, should we get back to calc?" he finally says trying to break the tension.

"Sure," Caitlin replied, even though they both already admitted they had their work done. "Oh wait, one last thing," she says as Jason finally gets the courage to look up again at her. Just as he turns his head, her lips meet his as he feels her smiling through him.

Jason finally makes it back home, after 30 minutes of sitting in his car unable to get himself to leave Caitlin's house.

"Dad, I'm home," he shouts as he makes his way to the kitchen. Jason walks past the phone and pauses, staring at it hang still on the wall. He needs to tell someone about the kiss and the feeling of her in

his arms. He feels the tingling in his stomach attempting to burst out. He feels the smooth plastic in his palm as he grabs the phone. It rings and rings and his hand struggles to keep the phone to his ear. Does he just hang up? Was this all a stupid mistake? Why did he do this?

"Hello?" Jason is frozen in fear, forgetting everything he had planned to say. "Hello?" one more time.

"Chris." Jason finally gets out.

"Jason?"

"I kissed a girl today...or well she kissed me I guess," he says with friendly laughter as if they were still best friends and nothing had happened.

"Ok? Good for you, I guess?" Chris's breathing gets fainter as Jason can tell he's going to hang up.

"Wait."

"What do you want?"

Jason knew what he wanted but his mind refused to let him get it out. He took a deep breath, taking in the moment and all the missed moments with his friends.

"My mom died."

"Yeah, uh, I know I'm sorry, I –"

Jason cuts him off. "She killed herself and you weren't there for me. You guys ditched me. You and Ryan, my best friends, abandoned me and couldn't even put the shit aside to be there for me."

"I uh-, didn't know that." Jason can hear the lump in Chris's throat causing his eyes to begin to swell.

"I know you didn't know that. You and Ryan never took a second to try and understand my life." Jason hand grips tighter around the phone.

"How could we understand if you never told us?"

"How could I tell you when all you did was call me a daddy's boy and say I'm fucking my parents?"

"It was all just jokes," Chris says getting defensive.

"Yeah well, my life isn't a joke. I never laughed, especially not when I found my mom's body in our tub bleeding out," he slams the phone back on the wall.

His dad comes rushing in, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just the wrong number," he says pushing passed his dad and rushing up the stairs before he could see the tears streaming down Jason's face.

"So just be quiet guys, my dad's not home, but my mom is trying to rest," Jason says as he cautiously unlocks the front door.

"It's only 3 o'clock, why is your mom sleeping dude," Ryan says pushing Jason as he opens the door. "I always thought maybe you were hiding that you were a secret millionaire, or your family was part of a satanic cult, or something with the way you hid your house, but this, well it's just a house. It's nicer than mine, but just a house," he says laughing.

Chris and Ryan look around in awe like a baby who put on glasses for the first time. It was nothing out of the ordinary, but the well-kept secret of THE house made it oddly eerie and magical at the same time. They creep down the halls staring at pictures on the wall, laughing at the one of baby Jason in a little metal bucket, taking a bath for a photographer. He was smiling wide, with a rubber duck on his head and bubbles covering his body.

"I've never seen you smile like this," Chris says.

Ryan stops, looking at a wedding photo of Jason's parents. It was just them two, his dad always said that no one approved so they were all they needed. He lifts it off the wall and holds it, studies it in his hands.

"Is this your mom?" he says. "I've never seen her before. She's beautiful, so obviously looks nothing like you," he says laughing.

The door swings open. "Jason, I thought I would stop by on my break—" his dad says pausing, staring blankly as if he just caught a burglar in his house.

His face clenches and reddens, "What are you doing in my house?" he shouts. The three boys stand unable to move. "Let me ask you one more time, What the HELL are you doing in my house?" He throws his briefcase to the floor and slams the door. Ryan and Chris stumble over inaudible sounds, trying to think of what to say.

"I invited them," says Jason.

His dad ignored him, as he notices Ryan is still holding the family picture in his hand.

"Give me that," he rips it out with ease, as Ryan is just a statue. "I'm giving you three seconds to get the fuck off my property before I call the police on you for trespassing. One..."

The boys don't even have time to think of what is happening, as their fight or flight kicks in and they run out the door. Jason follows after them but is stopped by his dad yanking on the back of his shirt. His dad grabs him and looks him deep in the eyes. Jason has heard his dad yell and throw fits, but there was genuine fear in his eyes mixed with murderous rage. His dad lets him go, as his muscles start to loosen up. Jason falls to the ground still looking at his towering father.

"Don't ever pull that shit again. No one and I mean NO ONE is allowed over here and I thought I made that clear." His dad walks to the kitchen and pours a drink, still leaving Jason as a puddle on the floor.

Jason couldn't get himself to get out of bed and go to school. One day had already diminished all the energy he had for his life. What was he supposed to do if he saw Caitlin? Did she like him? Was it a pity kiss? Does she kiss all her guy friends like that? Was it just a "I'm sorry your mom died, and your friends ditched you" kind of kiss? Forget about Caitlin, what was he supposed to do if he saw CHRIS? Jason covered his face with his hands, hoping he might wake up again and it was all a dream, well everything but the kiss.

"Hey," his dad says, knocking lightly and peering in. "You ready for school?"

Jason moans and rolls over to the other side of the bed. "I'm gonna stay home, I don't feel well."

His dad laughs lightly. "Ok bud, I'm heading to work so call me if you need anything?"

Of course, his dad was leaving. I mean why wouldn't he, he has to go to work. Why can't he be the dad to stay home with his "sick" kid and spend the day doing father-son things? But again, that's just another thing that would be a dream.

A little later in the morning, Jason is sitting on the couch watching whatever midmorning Tuesday shows are on. Today was *The Jenny Jones Show*, which he knew was for girls but being home so much recently he realized maybe girls were onto something. He's eating his 4th bowl of Cocoa Puffs, when the phone rings. Probably his dad checking in.

"Hello," Jason says holding the receiver on his shoulder up to his ear.

"Hey!" Caitlin says on the other line.

What is she doing home? How did he know he was home? Is it not Tuesday? Did he mess up the calendar?

"I saw you weren't at school this morning, so I figured I would call you from the payphone and make sure you were ok."

"Oh yeah, I'm ok. Yesterday just took a lot out of me."

"Do you need anything? I can stop by during my lunch break if you do."

"Um, I should be good, but thank you."

"Oh, ok." He could hear a slight disappointment in her voice, something he never thought to hear. Someone, well not just someone, CAITLIN, was disappointed that he didn't need her to come over.

"Uh, well, if you wanted to come over, some company would be nice."

"Ok! I'll be over around 11:30. See you then!" The line goes dead. Did she forget to say bye? Was she so excited that she forgot to say bye?

Jason couldn't believe it. THE girl was coming over to his house to check on him. He looked at his watch 10:30. One hour to get himself and the house into shape. He sprung off the couch, grabs the cereal box from off the floor, and rushes into the kitchen.

Jason stands by the door and glances at his watch 11:31. She's not coming he sighs and droops down. A knock at the door and he shoots up. Wait. He can't appear too eager like he's been standing at the door for 10 minutes, even though he was. One more knock.

"Coming," he yells, grabs the handle, pauses for 5 seconds, and then swings it open. "Come on in. Sorry it's kind of a mess," he says as Caitlin walks through with a bag in her hand.

"Here," she holds a brown paper bag out in front of her. "I got you

a donut on the way to school this morning, but then you weren't there, so I saved it and brought it over."

"Thank you!" he says. "Here let's go to my room and we can share it." His room. Why would he suggest that? They were in her room the other day, so maybe it's not weird. But then again, they were studying? But they had food. But her mom brought the food to them. Why would they need to go to his room to eat a donut? He didn't plan on her bringing a donut, it threw him off the script he planned out.

"Ok, do you have any napkins though? I don't want to make a mess."

Jason grabs some napkins from off his kitchen table and he heads towards the stairs. Caitlin is stuck looking at the pictures on the wall. The same picture Ryan held in his hands the first and last time he had people at his house.

"Is this your mom?" she says. "She looks just like you," she says it, almost questioning it.

"Really? No one has ever told me that. But I guess, no one has really seen my mom to tell me that," he says laughing to ease the tension. "Here, my room is this way."

He leads Caitlin up the stairs and to the door on the right. She walks up cautiously, just like he was the day before at hers. His stairs creak, unlike hers that bounced them up like sheep's wool.

"Nice set up," she says taking in all the posters and albums he has scattered on his wall. An acoustic guitar sat in the corner, polished and as clean as new.

"Thanks, sorry it's a little messy and cluttered."

"What? It's a lot neater than mine," she says laughing. She was right, it wasn't messy at all, because Jason spent the past hour cleaning everything to make sure everything was perfect and in place. "Do you

play?' she says gliding over to the guitar and plucking a few strings.

"Just a little. Just a few things I've taught myself."

"My dad plays all the time."

"Here, we can sit over here," he says motioning to the two blue, sinking, beanbags he found in his closet and positioned perfectly for them to sit down together.

The door slams downstairs. "Hey Jace, I'm home." His dad.

Jason is thrown into fight or flight. He can't have his dad scream at Caitlin, he can't have her ignore him and ditch him too. Footsteps start up the stairs.

"Here, go in my closet quick! My dad doesn't want people here." Jason hides her in between a few sweatshirts and closes the accordion door, trapping her inside.

"You look like you're feeling a little better!" his dad says standing in his doorway.

"Yeah, just trying to move around a little. Don't want the tv to make me sicker," he says with fake laughter as he tries to control his racing heart.

"Well, I thought since you weren't feeling well I would bring you some lunch. There's some McDonald's on the counter for you."

"Thanks dad. Are you staying for lunch?" Jason anxiously waits, hoping for a no.

"Eh, I was planning on it but then I got stuck at every redlight and so now I'm gonna be late. Sorry bud."

Jason can finally breathe.

"It's fine, have a good rest of your day."

"I will, you too. Let me know if you need anything," his dad says before descending back down the stairs. Jason waits listening to the

creaky floorboards, the handle turn, and finally the door slam.

He turns back to his closet and Caitlin has already burst out, wiping off dust from the back wall.

"Sorry about that. You know my dad," Jason says, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's fine," she says in a voice that didn't seem like her own. It's shallow and empty.

"Do you want to sit down?" Jason plops on a beanbag hearing the styrofoam balls sink into place around his body.

"I think I should just go."

"Oh, ok," Jason says pushing off the beanbag to stand up and heads downstairs.

Jason looks over to his clock, *6:30 AM* blinks at him in bright, neon red. He's been staring at the ceiling all night, counting every piece of chipped paint hoping it will help him fall asleep.

What went wrong? Was he too much? But she was the one who invited herself over. But he shoved her in the closet. Why would he do that? She knew how his dad didn't like people over. But that was because of his mom. His mom is dead, what is there to worry about? Why does he ruin everything? Does he go to school today? How does he face Caitlin? Did he ruin that? Maybe she was just overwhelmed. Maybe she was sick. She didn't seem like herself.

His mind ran back and forth between every possible reason why she left. He went through this over and over and still reruns it all in his mind.

"Jason," a knock. "Are you going to school today?" his dad asks.

"Yeah," Jason sighs after taking a moment to pause. Maybe Caitlin will see him, and it would've been a whole misunderstanding.

He throws on some cargo pants and a baggy black sweatshirt with his converse and rushes down the stairs eagerly. He'll see Caitlin and act like everything's normal. Because it is normal. Because she invited herself over. Because she brought him a donut. Because she wanted to see him.

"Meet you in the car," he yells to his dad leaving the front door wide open. His dad falls behind slowly, carrying his coffee in a new travel mug, as he prefers to buy new ones rather than just wash the others.

Jason stares out the window blankly as the car peels out of the driveway.

He just has to see Caitlin.

The car slightly shakes with the rapid tapping of his foot.

He just has to see Caitlin.

His pants slowly become covered with fingernails as he secretly bites away at them. He just has to see Caitlin.

"You ok bud?" his dad finally asks, putting his one free arm on Jason's shoulder, an attempt to calm the shaking.

"What?" Jason says snapping out of his trance.

"Are you ok? I'm worried you're going to flip that car over with all this shaking," he laughs off.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Fine?"

"Good, I'm good."

"If you say so, but I'm always here to talk."

Jason remains silent, reading each street sign as they inch closer to school. Ridgeway Ave. Starin St. Minnesota Ave. Turn right and they slowly creep in. The car isn't even fully in park as Jason pushes through

the door, swinging his backpack over his shoulder.

"Bye dad," he yells back, unsure if his dad even heard him. He rushes up the steps and swings open the door before peaking over the crowd, looking for that golden chestnut hair. He shoves his way through, following the light he can feel coming off of her. There, at her locker, talking with friends. He creeps in closer, but her back is to him as he reaches out to tap her shoulder.

"He shoved me in his closet," she says to her friends. He lowers his hand. "You guys were right, he's messed up." She swings around and he meets her eyes once again, and once again they bring out everything buried deep down.

"Jason," she gasps, as he turns around and pushes his way to the doors feeling a tear run down his face. He feels her presence shrink down. Is she not going to follow him? What did she mean they were right? Did everything he told her mean nothing? Is he just a joke to everyone? Did she tell them what he told her? Did she just want to fuck with him?

He runs down the steps just as he did a few minutes before. He looks around hoping his dad might still be there, but he's gone. His chest rises rapidly, as he starts to feel the tears turn into a sweat. He needs to leave. He looks to the street and runs. He can feel his shoes rubbing against the back of his foot, creating blisters with every step, but what does it matter he has to get home. The dark clouds above start to drizzle down, mixing with the sweat and tears leaking into his mouth.

He pushes open the front door, dripping and soggy. He throws his bag on the ground, rips his shoes off, exposing the blood leaking through the back of his socks. Fuck. What has his life come to? Why did he have any hope, even for a second? He looks and sees the wedding picture, his mom appearing to be full of life. Why was she never like this with him? Why did she lose herself? Was he the problem? Was he a disappointment? Did he drive his mom to kill herself? Why does

everyone leave him? Ryan, Chris, Caitlin, his mom. He's the common denominator in all of them. Fuck. HE'S the problem. HE'S the reason his life is crumbling down.

The phone rings. Maybe it's Caitlin. He rushes over, slapping his wet socks down with every step.

"Hello," he says eagerly.

"Jason?"

"Chris? Why the fuck are you calling me?"

"I saw you run out of school, I wanted to make sure you're ok."

"Why would I be ok?" Jason says biting on every word.

"Well, I've been thinking about what you said the other day and—"

"And what?" Jason says cutting him off. "Now you give a fuck or at least pretend to. Leave me alone asshole." He slams the phone back on the receiver and drags himself up the stairs. He pushes open the bathroom door and goes to turn on the bath. The wet clothes sticking to his body suffocate him with the cold, as his feet feel as if they're going to shrivel up and fall off from water damage. The metal of the faucet fights back at first, as it hasn't been touched since the last time.

The tub fills, as Jason slips off his clothes from his body that has been wasting away unknown under his baggy clothes. He examines the shell he has become from his sunken cheeks to the bones protruding from his hips, all the way to his ankles that feel like they may snap from his weight. He wonders why no one noticed but realized who would be there to notice.

Knocking on the front door.

"Jason!"

Jason pushes the curtains to the side and peeks on the window. Chris is pounding on the front door as his dad's car pulls into the driveway. The curtain falls back into place as Jason walks over to the

tub, carefully placing his feet in.

"Jason!"

He sinks in as the water slowly begins to cover his body. He rests his head back, letting his slightly dangle over the porcelain edge.

"Jason!" louder now as he hears the front door swing open.

He looks up as the razor on the sink twinkles in his eyes.



A wide-angle photograph of a road through a dense forest during autumn. The trees are heavily laden with bright orange, yellow, and red leaves, creating a canopy that filters sunlight onto the road. A metal guardrail runs along the right side of the asphalt road. The foreground is covered with a thick carpet of fallen leaves.

LES FLUERS AUTUMN ROAD

GAELE BLAKE

NOW THAT THE DAYLILIES ARE GONE

KENNETH POBO

I take comfort in the flowers
that make it into November,
like our picotee cosmos,
gentle yet fierce,
or our cupcake zinnias,
looking worn, but still
the occasional blossom. The daylilies,

they'll return, that's a comfort too,
knowing spring is doing
the hard work of sleeping
to get ready for new flowers.

STAYING ALIVE

ROBIN YOUNG



THE HAZELNUT SWIRL

AYSHE DENG TASH

As soon as she heard the keys jangling in the lock she jumped out of bed, throwing the duvet off until it was no longer on the mattress but scrunched up against the wall still holding her warmth. The digital clock on her bedside table showed, in its red neon numbers, that it was 4 am and so the room was shrouded in darkness even though she'd left the thick curtains open so that she could wake up at 7 am to get ready for school; the sun, when it decided to pierce through the dense grey clouds, helping swipe away sleep from her heavy eyes. Before she opened her bedroom door, she plunged her hand into the front pocket of her schoolbag, packed to explosion with the books she would be carrying with her in the morning, and pulled out the hazelnut swirl she'd saved for her father—his favourite—from the Quality Street tub she had shared with her mother that evening. She, picking out the oozing ones with soft sweet interiors of strawberry and orange crème and gooey caramel, her mother, the solid chunks of chocolate, milk choc block, fudge, and coconut éclair.

The chocolate pressed firmly against her palm, she pulled open the door and her father, who she waited for every night, was bent over, pulling his trainers off. As he stood up straight, the moonlight seeping in through the window behind him, she noticed even through the dimness that his cheeks were a slight shade of pink, the blood rushing to his face, a shield to protect him from the cold of the bitter London streets. His clothes glistened with rainwater, and his face had a shine, a single drop quivering on the tip of his nose. A year ago, on a night when she'd forgotten to close her bedroom door, she'd awakened by the sound of the leaking tap in the kitchen in the early hours of the morning and as

she lay in bed counting sheep, keys rattled in the lock before her father walked in. It was then that she realised how her father stayed out late into the night to provide for them, driving his taxi for hours on end in the bustling, bright-lighted streets of the city so that she could live.

As he stood before her she examined his profile, the horizontal crease at the top his nose, his right eye, closed, his eyelashes white in the moonlight glare.

"Dad, why have you been away for so long today?" she asked him, having counted that he'd been gone for twelve and a half hours that day—usually it was no more than eleven—and she wondered why he hadn't spoken to her yet, why he hadn't acknowledged her presence as he did every night, whispering because her mother was asleep upstairs that she should go to bed, that there was school tomorrow, as if she didn't know, before gently tapping her shoulder and directing her towards her own bedroom. Today, he'd already started climbing the stairs, one foot on the bottom step, the other still on the ground-floor carpet. Sensing that something was wrong, his breathing heavy and wheezy like something had clogged up his windpipe, she touched his arm, his polyester Adidas hoody crinkling under her fingertips. When she pulled her hand away, she realised that her palm was damp, and she looked at it, lifting the other for comparison, and it was dark, darker than her left, like when she dipped her fingers in blue-paint at school and smeared it across a blank piece of paper to make art.

"I have your favourite chocolate," she said, holding her arm up away from her thigh not wanting to wipe whatever it was that had adhered itself to her hand onto her clothing. "It's in my pocket but I can't get it because something has wet my hand."

He took another step and then another and he was up in the stairwell now, about halfway to the landing, the wooden floorboards creaking every time he climbed a step.

"Go play with your baby doll," he murmured and although the moonlight was no longer shining on him, she could still see his fair hand holding onto the white wooden banister; his index finger rising and falling, twitching as if struck by an electric current. She looked up at him in the dark ether of the stairwell and remembered that God was somewhere up there too as her mother had told her a thousand times, urging her to just open her arms and speak to him, that he'd hear always and wherever. And so, lifting her head up a little higher, and focusing on the white ceiling above her father, under her breath, and moving her lips to the rhythm of the words flittering through her mind she asked him, please God, to tell her what might have happened to her dad. She waited, tapping her foot against the carpet, not taking her eyes off the ceiling and when nothing happened she wondered whether He would instead send her a signal. Her father took another step and released a sound from his body, elongated like the scream of prey.

"What has become of you?" she said to him, her words like that of a 19th century lady—she'd been reading the classics lately, Austen and Hardy and Dickens, from a children's edition boxed collection her mother had bought her on a sale from Woolworths. When her father did not respond she whispered out the words again because the night-time was not for loud talking. "And I don't play with dolls anymore, dad," she said. "I'm a big girl now." She was certain that her father was not listening because the rattling in his throat was so loud she did not think he could hear her.

He bashed his knuckles against the banister three times and then his arm was swept away, over and out of sight. A groan emanated from his body as if there was a demon inside him trying to push its way out. She tried to lift her leg to walk towards her father, but her limbs did not move, her heart pumping in her temple and her palms a slurry of sweat, the hazelnut swirl melting, the chocolate dripping out of its packaging, making paths along the lines on her flesh. She inhaled,

long and loud, only interrupted by the sounds of her mother's footsteps moving across her bedroom upstairs, before the door opened, then a gasp before everything was silent again. A high-pitched sound radiated out of her mother's physical being and into the stairwell, and she knew that something was seriously wrong because of the murmurs and the way her mother kept slapping her thighs, in succession and firmly. And so she too started doing the same, hitting her thighs with force and then when her mother started crying outwardly, squeals of pain, she struck her palm across her mouth, forcing her fingertips between her pursed lips wanting to shove the sound down her throat and as she swallowed the creamy sweetness of the chocolate which she had smeared across her lips, made its way down her throat and she sighed in shock at what she'd done, how much she had failed to achieve the simple task of saving her father's favourite treat.

"Go to bed," her mother murmured. The floorboards moaned as her mother moved about. "What are you doing down there?" Her mother's voice was muffled as if her throat was being constricted by an outside force, and she wiped her palms against her pyjama bottoms and knew that her mother would be angry at her for doing such a thing. But it was too late she'd already done it. "Don't come. Go back to bed," her mother whispered.

She thought about telling her mother that she did not want to sleep, but the quiver in her mother's voice, the heaviness in her breathing told her not to. She took a step forward and leaned over to see her father's bulk in the darkness, face down, his limbs splayed as if in mid-breaststroke, his chin resting against the step close to the landing.

"Go back to bed," her mother started again, and she looked up at her mother whose hands were in her hair, her elbow jutted out into an L. And when she pulled them away, strands stood up around her hair reminding her of Beetlejuice. "I'll see you in the morning. Go."

She backed away, letting the wrapper fall to the ground and as she did so something squelched under her soles. She took another step back and there it was again, a squelch that reminded her that she was thirsty, that she'd like to drink a tall cup of milkshake, banana, and melted so that she can gulp it in one go. Squelch. Squelch. She could hear her father's breath in his throat, rattling and haggard like he'd run a thousand miles. Her eyes started drifting, her lids disobeying her curiosity of what she'd stepped on and she fought against them, yanking them open with her chocolatey fingertips that she imagined made her flesh taste sweet and she leant down and slid her palm across the rough fibres of the carpet which were wet and thick. She stood back up and drops dripped from her hand to the ground and she gazed at her palms, illuminated in black and white by the moon that filled up the dark expanse between the two apartment buildings across the courtyard. They were dark and she lifted them up to her nose and inhaled while her mother sobbed in the background, murmuring, occasionally telling her to go away.

The metallic taste of her fingers tickled the back of her throat, and she stifled a cough, wanting her mother to think that she'd gone to bed. She licked her hand and the liquid was warm inside her mouth, causing a gurgle in the depths of her stomach, the smell transporting her back to a year ago when her mother had tied a thread around her loose baby tooth, the other end knotted around the door handle, before she tugged the door shut without warning, her tooth thrown across the room into a plastic storage box of DVDs sitting beside the TV, the warm liquid pouring from her gum, pooling inside her mouth and slivering out of her lips all the way down her chin tasting exactly like the substance coating the top of her tongue and sliding down her gullet. Short beeps emanated from the stairwell as her mother dialled numbers on her phone, inhaling and exhaling heavily. A few seconds later, she spoke, uttering her brother's name, and her voice was overridden by the sound of her head thumping against the banister, and she could not tell exactly what her mother was

saying. While her mother stopped talking to quickly to catch her breath, she could hear her uncle's voice, coughing as he always did because he smoked too much, but his words were distorted within the device and then her mother spoke again: "Bleeding", "Stabbed", "Please come."

The floors creaked once more as her mother rose, and peeking over the edge of the banister she saw her picking her father up by his shoulders, and turning him over. She gazed at her father's trainers, at the laces undone on one, the toe cap scrunched up from resting on the step for too long on the other. A glimmer caught her eye to her right and she looked away from her father's shoes, eager to see what could possibly be shining in such pervasive darkness with the clock ticking in the sitting room and the tap, which she'd heard her mother ask her father countless times to fix, dripping into the sink in the kitchen. Gazing down the corridor into her bedroom at the mirror shining as the moonlight struck off of it, she saw her reflection, from head to toe enwrapped by her pink pyjamas which were an almost-red in the darkness, one leg stained by the chocolate she'd smeared against it. How terrible it looked she thought, imprinted their where it shouldn't be like the substance on the carpet, squelching under her slippers, soaking into the cloth of her soles, up to her feet where she could feel its coldness.

"I think..." she heard her mother say, "He's...." Sounds emanated from the phone, like static in a barrel. "Dead." There was complete silence which was broken by two successive drops of water hitting the metal sink. The word "dead" reminded her of resistance, resistance against brushing her teeth before bed, against washing her face on those winter mornings when it was cold and her flesh hurt under the touch of everything. "I'll kill you. You're dead," her mother would say, opening her eyes up wide as she uttered the words, leaning in close to her so that she could see the anger in her soul. What's father done? What has he resisted? she thought to herself, to be punished in this way?

She walked into the dark expanse of the bedroom, pulled her duvet up onto the bed, then lay on the mattress and covered her body all the

way up until her shoulders. Her head submerged into the pillow she looked up at the ceiling, a dirty yellow, the hue of the streetlights casting shadows on the wall which flickered every time a car passed by, its wheels sloshing over the puddles which had been collecting rainwater all day. What's happened? she thought to herself, oddly knowing that this was the last time she'd be seeing her father. The news on TV had taught her that dead was a finality, that it meant disappearing into the ground until you turned to dust.

"He takes that route every day," she heard her mother say. She was sobbing, loudly then quietly as if she was trying to calm herself down because it was night-time and night-time was always silent. "I don't know what happened today."

She knew the route her mother was talking about, just cross the road, visible from her bedroom window which she stood at every single day after her father set off to work, watching him emerge from under the cherry tree planted in their neighbour's garden two floors below them, his hands plunged into his pocket, rocking from side to side, and sometimes he'd glance up and give them a wave, and sometimes blow them a kiss, and when he had made his way across the courtyard of the apartments in front of them he'd pull up his garage door and then disappear for a few minutes, while the lights on his taxi came on and he drove back, got out, yanking his garage door shut, getting back into the car and driving away up left and away behind the buildings where they couldn't see him anymore.

She closed her eyes, then opened them almost instantaneously to a room shrouded again in complete darkness, the yellow hue on the walls was no more and she turned to the window and saw only a black void into which she imagined herself floating, absorbed into nothingness. She bounced the back of her legs against the mattress but could not see them and so she imagined they did not exist, visualising her limbs scattered

about, suctioned into a black hole. And when she closed her eyes once more she could hear the sound of her heart in her chest, pumping at a steady rhythm, until someone yelled in the distance, a shriek, a cry of pain, that of a prey fighting for its life and she wondered if the owner of the voice was also a victim like her father, whether he too had holes in his body, oozing blood until the body ran dry, pale and white like a ghost. And as she turned over, pulling the duvet with her, she heard a small thud, something rolling below her and when she glanced at the sound she saw the hazelnut spinning away in the pitch-black expanse that was once the ground.

A wide-angle photograph of a rugged coastline. Dark, jagged rocks are scattered along the shore, many of which are covered in bright green moss. Waves from the ocean to the right break against these rocks, creating white foam and spray. The sky above is filled with heavy, grey clouds, suggesting an overcast day.

CRASHING IN 6M
TERESA BLAKE

REASONS WHY VIOLET STAYS IN BED DURING OCTOBER

ASHLEY PATRICE

Reasons Why Violet Stays in Bed During October

The burning sensation in her nostrils
from those wet winds and polar air.

Those gray skies and charcoal nights
or a trail of dirty footprints sketching
her path after each step.

The paranoia of being followed by wandering spirits
looking for a warm place to stay. The glorification
of inflatable witches and fake skeletons whispering
you could be next as she passes by. *What's the point
of cemeteries when you can mock them with crucifixes?*
she thinks. She retreats to her day coffin—
sorry—
bed.

Her body tosses and turns, clicking the next episode,
the next video, turning the next page—ignoring
the pleas of her brain to unplug, threatening to shut down
permanently. The faded red numbers glare at her, shaking
their heads in disappointment. The warnings of next-day
regrets creep up on her crust-filled eyes.

She does the walk of shame to her gray Chevrolet Malibu:
to the next class,
to the next shift,

to the next wallet shrinker,
to the next calorie collector.

Her lack of internal vitamins shakes her bones like Tourette's.
Her face sinks like she hasn't eaten in three months.
She is as pale as a human limb fresh out of a cast. She craves
hot tea to defrost her organs into functioning
as if she didn't drink Bloody Marys for breakfast.

And while everybody else plays dress-up, competing for cavities,
she'll put a caramel apple to her teeth to seal them shut to mask her
silent wails.



BECOMING STILL
LARISSA MONIQUE HAUCK

THE DEVILS HAVE BEWITCHED OUR HORSES

FATEMEH MOUSAVI

The sacred veil of falling snow
 Danced before the faint face of the moon—
 The howling blizzard whipped the mortal skin,
 Our courage collapsed; vanished were the tracks in this gloom.

The devils have bewitched our horses—
 On the oasis of sin they stamped their feet,
 Glazing were their silver tongues and crimson eyes
 Sinister spells were whispered to every steed.

The devils drifted round and round—
 Like autumn leaves they circled to the weeping wind
 The branched prayed to heavens, cold and bare
 Our eyelids sewn shut, with no ties the beasts could be tamed.

Fretful unfamiliar screams—why so sorrowful their song?
 Truly where do they hurry? There is nowhere to be found!
 Do they hail a riderless war, or a domain's wall to fall?
 Fury do they seek, or do they seek sound?

Our marble skins were cold as the tombstone of the dead,
 Planted were the seeds of madness in every mind
 A priest said some prayer in Latin as I recall:
 “Corpus Christi, salve me-” but choked on every word.

Shattered eyes opened, ‘twas too late—
 The masters that whipped them once now bled beneath their knell
 Fell the sleepwalkers of midnight like bleeding blooms
 The misty ghosts have guided us across this icy hell.

The silent bell cries, a child dies, hearts sneer
 To the abyss we go wild astray for evermore;
 We plunge with no face, no name, no soul—
 O hail thee tormented trees! We shall ramble no more.

SHORT TAILED BLUE BUTTERFLY
SUWAN CHOI



MY BEST FRIEND, ARTHUR REDBAUCH

KYLER AKAGI

Being a vampire wasn't easy. When I was normal (human), I was an early bird, so it took a few decades to adjust to being a night owl. Or should I say night bat. Or bat. Anyways, turning into a bat was cool, but the novelty ran out faster than you would expect, requires a lot of upper arm strength. I was pretty ethical as far as vampires go. I didn't make familiars, I didn't turn anyone, and I didn't kill, just nibbled on late-night roamers. Usually, that meant the town drunks, which took as much a toll on my liver as theirs.

Being a vampire was pretty lonely. While the Old World has always had strong and vibrant vampire communities, here in America, we're so spread out and few and far between you can barely organize a convention (besides D.C.).

Becoming human again wasn't easy, but modern medicine and sacraments can get you there. Life's better now, being human again. And I am a human being, mind you: I hold down a nine-to-five, I don't disintegrate at dawn, I enjoy garlic bread and sunny afternoon walks, I age, I'll die someday, just your regular guy in 98% of ways.

But that remaining 2% are my fangs. Those don't go away. The worst part is that people don't clock it right away. But if they catch my mouth open, at the right angle, like if I'm talking, or laughing, or smiling... and they realize how long my canines are... It's kind of hard to make friends if you don't talk or laugh or smile.

Of course, there's still quite a stigma against ex-vampires. Maybe if I lived in the Old World it'd be different, but believe it or not the greater Kansas City metropolitan area is not the most progressive place

for ex-vampires. Not that moving is an option, what with "ex-vampire" stamped on my passport.

When people realize what I am, at best, they usually give me a nervous smile, and try to scurry away as quick as they can. At worst... people can be pretty nasty.

I get it. My teeth are frightening.

I'm frightening.

You get used to doing things by yourself. Walking in the park, going to the cinema or symphony, treating yourself to an ice cream or a nice dinner... it's never with a friend, never on a date. But I'd like it to be someday.

And let me tell you, being an ex-vampire makes finding a roommate tough. I like to think of myself as an honest human, so I posted what I thought was a very honest ad on Craigslist.

FORMER VAMPIRE LOOKING FOR ROOMMATE

Currently living alone in a three-bedroom apartment in Lenexa, Kansas, twenty minutes away from downtown Kansas City. The unit has a washing and drying machine, balcony, and the complex offers trash AND recycling pickup. There is also a dog park, pickleball courts, and a saltwater pool. Your contribution to rent would be \$400, and split utilities. You may use 2/3 bedrooms, and you're welcome to turn one into an office.

I am pet friendly :)

In hindsight, I guess it looked a bit like a trap, too good to be true, that I was indeed a real vampire looking for prey. But the truth was I was just looking for a person to hang out with. I thought all those amenities for just \$400 would be enticing enough.

It was well over a year before anyone responded to my ad. When Arthur reached out, I wasn't in a position to say no. We first met at a coffee shop, neutral territory. Fair enough, he wanted to make sure I was legit. He stuck out, bit of a scruffy look about him, hair in a loose ponytail. He wore an oversized olive jacket too, that matched his distinctly olive eyes; he looked a bit like a man out of time, and would've blended in well with the hippies.

I approached him and asked, "Arthur Redbauch?"

"You're my roommate?" he asked. He flashed a wolfish smile.

I chuckled. "You from around here, Arthur?"

"No man, new to town. I've been researching places to stay and brother, let me tell you, with these rent prices – " Arthur whistled. "I know you're an ex-vampire, but man, these landlords are the real bloodsuckers, am I right?"

That got a big laugh out of me. I hadn't laughed like that in decades.

Arthur moved into the apartment, and while we weren't instantly buddy-buddy, we got along fine. He was a handyman, and seemed to make his money picking up odd jobs. However he made it, his fifth of the rent came in on time every month.

We honestly didn't have that much in common: I liked classical music and operas, he liked jazz and rock and roll; I liked wine, he preferred beer; he obviously didn't mind getting his hands dirty, whereas I'm something of a germaphobe. But that didn't matter. He was a solid guy, and what I appreciated most about Arthur is that he treated me like I was normal, like I was a human being. The fact that I used to be a vampire didn't concern him.

As it turned out, while I had been upfront about my medical history, Arthur wasn't so upfront with his.

Arthur, handsome rogue that he was, would very consistently shoot me a text every four weeks, saying "Hey, I'm going to have company tonight." The implication was obvious: he wanted some privacy. The first few times this happened, he always graciously insisted on paying to put me in a hotel room, but I always politely declined; when love struck me someday, I didn't expect to pay Arthur to leave us alone.

On this particular night, in my silk pyjamas and with the hotel room's A/C cranked to 65°F, I realized I had forgotten something crucial in the apartment: Dr. Acula's Toothpaste. For vampires and ex-vampires alike, Dr. Acula's patented formula is the only solution on the market for long-term dental care for our chompers. I used it religiously, because the American healthcare system does NOT provide good solutions for vampires whose teeth are falling out. Dr. Acula's isn't something you can pick up at a convenience store or twenty-four-hour mart, but something that has to be medically prescribed.

I bit my lip, and texted Arthur:

I need to drop in for my toothpaste. Is that okay?

Ten minutes went by. Twenty. Half an hour. I was getting sleepy, but couldn't go to bed without brushing my teeth. I hopped in my Prius for a quick trip back home.

I felt a bit like I was breaking into my own apartment, which was rather silly. I crept up to our door, and slid the key in as quietly as possible. I figured I could make it to my bathroom in twenty-five steps. This is one of the few occasions I missed being able to transform into a bat, to be a little more discrete when traversing the apartment.

Well, imagine my surprise as I open the door, to see a gigantic wolf STANDING in my kitchen, eating raw hamburger meat straight out of my sink.

My mouth was agape.

"I can explain!" the wolf said. It had Arthur's voice. And distinct olive eyes.

"You're a werewolf?" I screamed.

"Keep your voice down and shut the door," he growled.

I slammed the door shut, and looked at the mess of bloody raw meat containers in the kitchen. I started gagging.

"Don't worry, I'm going to clean this up," Arthur said. His eyes were cast downward. His ears drooped, just like his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I'll move out tomorrow."

My face scrunched up. "What? Arthur, I'm not going to kick you out."

His eyes snapped to me, and his ears perked up. "You're not?"

"You accept what I am. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't accept what you are, the one thing that humans hate more than vampires. And you're a great guy! Who also happens to be a werewolf!"

Arthur's tail started wagging. "You're a good friend."

"Now I'm going to get my toothpaste and head back to the hotel, because if I have to keep looking at this crime scene I'm going to have a panic attack."

I think after that, Arthur and I actually became friends, and started hanging out a lot more. I got out of my comfort zone, and let Arthur take me to do things I had never done before. Same with him.

And, we would razz each other with little inside jokes that only we would get.

When I was struggling up the wall at his climbing gym, he said, "Why don't you just fly up there?"

When I took him to the golf course, and there was a squirrel in the woods beside us, I made a big deal of holding Arthur back, and yelled at the squirrel, "Run for your liiiiiiiife!"

When Arthur took me to a firing range, I asked the range manager, "And you don't have any silver bullets, right?"

When we were buying camping supplies, Arthur told me, "Be careful around those wooden stakes."

Whenever we went to the nice steakhouse, we always raced to order for each other first, and tell Sera, our usual waitress, "And he'll have that extra rare." Of course, I always had to doublecheck with Sera that mine would be well-done.

And who says vampires and werewolves can't be friends?

When dining at the steakhouse, our perennial subject of debate was who had it better.

"Vampires have it easier because you're a bunch of rich snobs," Arthur said, taking a swig of beer.

"Are you kidding me? Werewolves have it so much easier! You can actually live a normal life." I gestured to him with my glass of red wine. "You get to be in society, and no one will ever figure out who you are!"

"I mean, when it's that time of the month..."

"But you can plan for it, plan around it. And even if someone sees a werewolf, they're never going to figure out it's you." I took a drink of my wine, my teeth clinking against the glass. "Not like vampires. It's obvious you're a vampire."

Arthur shrugged. "I wouldn't say never figure out it's you. You figured me out dude, a werewolf's eyes always give him up." He took another sip of beer. "Besides, we certainly don't get hooked up with Uncle Vlad's trust fund like you guys do. We wolves have to fend for ourselves."

"It ain't all it's cracked up to be, Arthur. Why do you think I became a human again? The perks didn't outweigh the cost."

"Not even transforming into a bat?"

"It's okay, but bats are delicate. I couldn't actually fly long distances."

"That's because you have little noodle arms."

"See that's another thing! Werewolves get all this alpha male

testosterone and muscle, even when you're human. You look like you're on steroids. And an experimental hair-growth pill."

"It ain't a perk if you're a woman. Vampire ladies though, yow-za. If you know any Morticias, let me know. I'll be her Gomez."

"You do know Morticia's not a vampire, right? Are you thinking of the Munsters? Lily Munster's a vampire."

"Yeah sure, she's crazy hot too."

"Well then that'd make you Herman. One of Frankenstein's monsters."

"Don't see too many of them nowadays. Maybe for the best."

Sera caught my eye, emerging from the kitchen, dancing around the tables with a tray of steaks destined for another table in hand.

Arthur noticed. "You think you'll ever find a mate?"

"I hope so."

Sera looked our way for a moment, and we locked eyes. She quickly looked away.

I sighed. "Sometimes, I think that if it hasn't happened by now, it's not going to happen at all." I took a sip of wine.

"Well, it's like they say, thirty's the new twenty."

I almost spat. "I appreciate you thinking I'm in my thirties, but you forget, young whippersnapper, how old I really am. What about you though, are you actually trying to find your Lily?"

Arthur shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a romantic. And wolves are wired for monogamy."

"Y'know I've never really asked, but do you have any friends like you? A pack? You guys have packs, right?"

Arthur took a drink of his beer. "I know some guys, but I don't like packs."

"Don't like them?"

"One way or another, packs are there to kill. Not my scene."

I nodded. "I get that. I wish... I don't know. I wish I had a pack

of people. You know what I mean?"

"I think you're describing friends."

I couldn't help but laugh sullenly to myself. "Yeah. But people don't really like you when you're like me."

Arthur quieted. "Maybe we can do something to change that."

Arthur proceeded to tell me the craziest plan I had ever heard. His green eyes were fiery, as the words rolled out of his mouth. It reminded me of jazz, improvisational; I didn't like jazz, not until Arthur.

"And the timing will be perfect!" he said. "You're going to have more friends than you know what to do with!" He slapped me on the back as we walked out into the cold winter air. "Just don't go for the snout."

The first Saturday of every December, the whole city of Lenexa gathers for a giant holiday lights ceremony in the park. Bushes and tree branches were netted with lights, waiting to be lit. The park would shine in every color of the rainbow, dazzle the children, and warm the hearts of the whole community at 7:30 p.m.

There I was, milling about in the dark. I felt alone among the thousand plus people, and cold cameras of local news crews. We were all waiting for Mayor Breckenridge and some lucky kid to press the button, and illuminate the park like Time's Square.

Until then, our only light was the full moon.

"Alright, can I hear our countdown?" Mayor Breckenridge asked on the mic. Next to him on the stage was a little girl, holding a big red button.

"Ten – Nine – Eight – Seven..." the community started shouting out.

I made sure to position myself in the front row.

"Six – Five – Four..."

I saw him in the moonlight, bounding between the trees in the dark woods.

Three.

Two.

One.

As the little girl pushed the button, the whole park illuminated. Everyone cheered, then screamed, as a werewolf had suddenly appeared, glowering behind her.

She screamed too, and collapsed to the stage.

While everyone else ran away, I ran to the danger, jumped on the stage. “Paws off her you monster!” I screamed, grabbing Arthur by the shoulder and giving him a right hook to the jaw.

We had practiced our punches beforehand, but that was before he had transformed, so I actually caught his jaw. I don’t know how much it hurt him, but my hand was throbbing as he dramatically collapsed on the stage. I continued my defense of the little girl, the community. I pretended to kick him in the stomach, though my foot always just slowed before contact. Still, Arthur was a good actor, and made it look like I was rocking his body, as he howled in pain.

As the community recovered, lost their fear, and watched, Arthur scrambled to feet. It might have been a trick of the light, but right before he scurried off, I swear he winked at me. The crowd was in a stunned silence.

I helped the little girl to her feet. She hugged me at the waist. I couldn’t help but smile, my teeth visible, smiling wide and true.

Despite my face, despite my fangs, the crowd erupted in applause.

I was out all night, and didn’t get home until right before dawn. I was still buzzing with adrenaline, with euphoria, yelling at Arthur what had happened the moment I walked in the door.

“Arthur, your plan went perfectly! The mayor said right there in front of the news cameras that I would be leading an ex-vampire societal reintegration campaign! A dozen of reporters interviewed me right then, asking me about my life, what people get wrong about ex-vampires, and *hundreds*, literally hundreds of people thanked me after! And guess who

gave me her telephone number! Freaking Sera from the steakhouse! I am not even making this up! She showed me this is going viral, that dozens of people caught the fight on their phones! Arthur, you made me a hero!”

Arthur wasn’t in the living room to hear any of that. I went to his bedroom to give him a big hug. “Arthur!”

But his room was empty.

So was the spare bedroom.

Every room in our apartment was empty, but for me.

I went back to the living room, and saw a letter on the counter, addressed to me. I quickly opened it.

I hope everything went well – it seems like it did! I hope that you find the love and respect you deserve from these people, from this community, that they’re good to you, and become good friends. It occurred to me that if everything went according to plan, and the humans ever saw us together, and that we’re friends... they’d put two and two together. That wouldn’t go so well for us. Especially you. Like I said a werewolf’s eyes always give him up. I guess we won’t see each other again.

Thanks for the memories.

Your friend,

Arthur

As dawn broke the night, tears ran down my face; I felt like I was disintegrating.



THE PATH TO AUTUMN
FRANCES FISH

THE LEAVES REFUSE TO DIE QUIETLY

JOSHUA ADAM WALKER

The leaves don't fall- they fling themselves,
red fists against the throat of sky.
Everything here is going out screaming:
the trees, the sun, the year.
Even the wind sounds like it's begging.
In autumn, the light turns suspicious.
Shadows stretch like gossip.
Even memory has a brittle edge
snap it wrong and it'll bleed.
I walk through the storm of what was,
gathering flame-colored regrets in my hands,
like someone might still need them.
This is the season that teaches us
how to disappear with dignity
but I never learned that part.

AUTUMN BLOOM

LIANA MEYER



SISTER WITCHES

MCKENNA WILDS

History is a grimoire

of every woman's silenced spells,
spilled potions, broken altars,
and murdered coven.

I grieve unknown souls.

Sisters of the past—
you were bright constellations,
but “holy ones”
marked you 666
and tossed you six feet under.

Let me drink your tea

and light your candles.

Let me smell the roses

that grew over your grave,

and in the morning

I will fold their stems
into a flower crown
that nymphs will covet by noon.

For you, I write this spell:

my blood is a potion,
my bones an altar,
and my body a coven,
and I will continue your story.



ORANGE
ISABELLA SUELL

AURORA

JOHN BRADY

The surface of the sun is very hot. 6,000 degrees Celsius. That's a lot of degrees. Even more in Fahrenheit. But those aren't the most. There's a hotter part. The core of course. Where the fusion of hydrogen into helium takes place and releases a lot of heat which radiates past the core, cooling as it does until it reaches the 6,000-degree temperature at the surface.

That makes intuitive sense, he thought. That the sun would cool as the distance from its core increased. It's like how you can almost burn your finger holding it close to a light bulb – the old incandescent kind, not those LEDs which hardly radiate any heat at all – but don't have to worry if you move your finger away. You'll still feel the heat, but your skin won't come close to burning.

Yet nature isn't always intuitive. For example, a funny thing happens with the sun. The sun gets hotter past its surface. In its corona, the wispy hairs of light and heat surrounding the sun and visible during an eclipse. It's millions of degrees hotter. It's like if, as you were moving your finger away from the lightbulb and feeling the heat decrease, the air would suddenly be alive with so much hot you'd sear not just your finger but your whole hand up to your wrist and maybe past it. That's like what happens with the sun and its corona.

When in the middle of the night he couldn't sleep and no amount of tossing and turning or meditative breathing would help, he'd go and read science websites to distract himself with their complexity and try and still his mind.

That's where he was reading about the sun's oddly extra hot corona. For many years, scientists had been puzzled by this. He wondered if their puzzlement was because they shared his lightbulb and finger understanding of heat's effect over a distance or if it was for more intellectually sophisticated reasons. The article had a picture of the sun's surface which was divided into millions of convective cells that the author said were the size of Texas. He knew why the author had made that comparison but he wished he hadn't. He did it to help the readers imagine an area of immense size on a celestial body of which they had never had nor ever would have any direct experience. He wanted to help them understand something that was very abstract by comparing it to something more concrete and, most likely, more familiar.

Why pick a state with such a harshly partisan reputation and risk alienating readers like him, though? Why not pick a geographic area that was more neutral? Switzerland came immediately to mind of course, although that might turn off people prone to be irritated by what they saw as the implicit occidental bias of sciences like solar astronomy. Ideological resonances of geographical designations aside, he also didn't like the comparison because the cells didn't look at all like Texas. They reminded him of the dimples on a heavily used basketball: numerous and consistent except where they had been worn away by the ball's heavy use. Basketball dimples the size of South Sudan. That would have worked better, he thought. South Sudan was in Africa and roughly sized and shaped like the convective cells themselves and basketball was played and enjoyed both by many people and many different kinds of people around the world. Such a reference would thus have resonated with numerous readers, provided them with real insight about the surface

of the sun and all the while been less politically fraught and less First World-centric.

He'd never get to sleep thinking thoughts like these.

He read on, hoping to learn the physics at work in the aurora. Which is why he clicked on the article in the first place because it was about the sun and promised to solve a solar mystery. Nothing about the aurora though. Just a lot about convective cells and magnetic fields, some so vast that they shot out through the solar sky past all of the planets and Pluto and even further into the endless airless black beyond the solar system's end. The explanation about how really long filaments of magnetized particles produced unexpectedly excessive heat was, in the end, complex and hard to follow exactly. Trying to understand did still his mind and made him sleepy and he could go back to bed and sleep.

*

"Wake up dear," he heard his mom say as she gently pressed his shoulder. He didn't know how long she had been talking. You never really do. Only the last call to Wake up out of possibly many being the first thing you realize. He was five or six and it was summer. He had gone to sleep in the twilight's deep gray. It was real night now. The view black out his open bedroom window and the air, free of the day's heat, seeped through the screen and coolly down across the blanket. It felt good.

"What?" he asked.

His mom knelt down and stroked his hair. "It's okay. Nothing's wrong. It's okay," worried about the distress she thought she heard in the question.

He shook his head. "It's not morning. What?" he repeated, rubbing

his eyes.

"No, it's not honey." He wasn't worried, just wondering and she could get excited. "It's the northern lights! They're out and we can see them." She pulled the thin summer-weight blanket back. "This almost never happens here," and by that she meant where they lived. "Come on. You can stay in your pjs. It's really special."

She left his room for the lighted hallway, and he padded after her. "What lights?"

*

He imagined the first person who saw the aurora. It was something he liked to do, a daytime fantasy to occupy things when idle thoughts weren't enough. He didn't think that person was believed. It was an unlikely thing he knew, but that unlikeliness was part of why he kept coming back to the story and letting it unfold. Unlikely that there was one and only one person who was the first human to witness the aurora. A phenomena like the aurora – spread out across a significant portion of the globe – would most likely have been seen for the first time by multiple people even with the planet being so much more sparsely populated than it is now. A sense of realism is important but an overzealous attachment to it spoils daydreams.

So even if it was a bit fantastic that there was one particular someone like that, he balanced that with the assessment that they wouldn't have been believed. This he thought was pretty realistic. Whatever the historical period, people tend to be skeptical. Part of that is simply a survival thing. Credulous prehistoric humans would eat the berries without worrying if they were edible or they would wander into the woods unconcerned about predators and poison themselves or get eaten just like modern people who lacked sufficient levels of suspicion would give away their life savings to fake Nigerian princes and die in

poverty. Those more inclined to incredulity didn't do those things and didn't suffer those fates. They didn't poison themselves and they kept their pensions. They passed their genes on. Secured their legacies. So yes, he believed in skepticism's value across time.

In the case of the aurora's first witness, the others who didn't see it would have been doubly skeptical. Because as he imagined it, the person was young. Not a child. Not that young. More like a teenager. An adolescent. Usually a boy. Sometimes he imagined it was a girl, but mostly he pictured a boy peering up into the night sky to see the first aurora or, more precisely, the first aurora perceived by human eyes. He knew it wasn't fair to favor the boys like that in his daydreams. It was a cultural bias and if there was a place where it should be easier to dispense with assumptions like that, you would think it would be in made-up stories. Still, biased or not, it just felt more natural to imagine that a long time ago it would be a boy who would be more adventurous and willing to break the rules of his tribe or clan and stay up late at night to be there when the aurora slipped down from space into the sky to be seen for the first time.

Even if the gender of the protagonist of the story varied, one thing that did not was his firm belief that they – boy or girl – would be doubted by the adults in the group. Sometimes he imagined the kid waiting impatiently for the first adult to stir in the early morning before excitedly telling them what they had seen as their elder yawned and stretched away the sleep. Other times he thought that the kid would wait because they would need time to process the incredible thing they had seen. Once he had done that, he'd whisper it – because he was still a bit unsure – to his mother or father – because he felt they would be most understanding of his story. But they weren't. In this and the other cases he cared to imagine, the adults, regardless of the presence or absence of a familial relationship to the witness, would shake their heads in disbelief and dismiss the kid's testimony.

There were lots of reasons for this. Some of them even rational. What do kids know after all? They don't have the life experience . . . the observational practice. They're liable to make mistakes. To see things that aren't there or aren't what they thought they were. Lights in the sky. Dragons under the bed. So it was right and rational for adults, whether in a band of hunter gatherers way up in the Northern Hemisphere or in a bedroom community outside a major city, to treat the stories of children as something less than true.

But he thought that there were other motivations for disbelief that weren't quite so creditable. Jealousy for one. Kids have such good imaginations. Have such easy access to other worlds. Like they can dissolve part of themselves and cross over into that realm where you can bring something to life just by thinking it. Pull it right out of nothing and into being with a pop. And then make it disappear again. He felt how fun this had been when he was a kid just as he knew he couldn't do it anymore. Not for real. Yeah sure, he could tell himself a story. Make something up. But he couldn't completely leave. Some part of him remained stuck looking at the story from the outside, knowing it was just that – something he made up. That didn't really exist. It made him sad, and frankly, when he saw some young person lost, really, truly lost in a world of their own making, he envied them. If anyone should be able to loose the bonds of the world and escape to someplace else, it should be adults, burdened as they are by reality's mostly shitty, persistent demands. But nope.

If he felt this way, he thought it was certainly possible his ancestors did too. Humans had changed a lot but not that much. Although maybe they wouldn't have framed it exactly as jealousy, but he believed they would have felt it even if they didn't name it that way. So he thought they would dismiss the reality of a night sky exploding with colors. Not only because they were skeptical of kids generally but because they resented the kids' abilities to dream something like that up and believe

in it so much they thought it really happened. That's why they dismissed kids, including the kid who first saw the aurora, and maybe even made fun of him (or her) and tried to make him ashamed of himself. Because they were jealous and this jealousy – or whatever they would have called it way back then – drove them to something more and meaner. It drove them to want to usher those kids, including this kid in particular, more quickly out of childhood and into adulthood where fantasies were just that.

*

"What lights?" he repeated from the back seat of their car.

"The northern lights!" his mother said as she turned and reached over the front seat to make sure the seat belt across his lap was snug. It was the 1970's and before every kid had to be strapped into a car seat and the front seats were mostly bench seats not those bucket ones. The vinyl covering the back seat was cold through his pjs and he slid his rump back and forth to warm it up.

"The northern lights," she repeated, still looking back at him. "The sky fills up with beautiful blues and greens and sometimes even pinks. Like cotton candy. You remember cotton candy, right? We had it at the circus earlier this summer. You liked it."

He had and he nodded. "Why are they there?"

"The lights?"

And when he nodded again, his mom went on. "Well, your grandma used to say they appeared when God opened heaven's gates for an evening and let his holy light spill out over the earth." She laughed lightly, amused that she had once believed that but also a little ashamed that she had as well. "Why do they appear?" she asked her husband.

His dad used that voice of his – deeper than usual, slower, with

more pronounced enunciation – that he later realized his dad thought made him sound smart and disguised what he sensed was the true scope of his ignorance. "The sun is the source of the lights. The sun periodically sends out these special types of rays. When these rays reach earth, they interact with the atmosphere – with particles in the atmosphere. You know tiny little particles," and he made a more or less imperceptible gap with his thumb and forefinger to illustrate the particles' tininess. And then there is a chemical reaction between the ray and the particles that creates light and makes the sky glow. That's how it happens." Adding firmly and definitively, he finished, "It's not about heaven," hoping that dispelling that silly story would burnish the veracity of his account.

"Why do we have to drive?" he asked.

"We have to get away from the city lights. The darker the sky, the better we'll be able to see the show."

His mother chimed in, "We almost never get to see them this far south. That's why we woke you up. This is special. Normally, you have to be way up north by the North Pole to see them."

"No, not that far north," his dad disagreed. "You can see them in Canada. You don't have to be at the pole."

"Rarely. Rarely, do they see them in Canada."

"How would you know? How many Canadians do you know? You've never even been to Canada."

"I've read about it?"

"Oh yeah, where?"

"The newspaper."

He fell asleep to the contrapunctual strains of the car's hum and his

parent's bickering.

*

"What did you say the colors were?" That's how he often imagined the clan's skeptical, envious adults beginning their interrogation of the kid. At first, the kid would hold defiantly to the truth of what they had seen. Something which they could still call forth vividly in their thoughts. He, or sometimes she, knew what they saw and knew it was real and had happened. The experience had been so intense, so unlike anything they had ever seen in their life. True, compared to the adults, their life had been short, and they had lived through comparatively little of time and experienced only a small amount of the world. That didn't matter. Those colors were so luminous and moved so fluidly, they were initially sure that even if they lived to be more than a hundred and traveled through all the world, they would never see something so magical like that again. Especially if the kid was on the younger side, they would believe this and be firm. If the kid he imagined was older – like already well into adolescence – and thus starting to become aware of the limits of childhood and the approaching wide vistas of the adult world and what that might mean for what they still had to experience, then more doubt would creep in earlier. Perhaps these older kids would think there was something more special to discover. Perhaps what they thought they saw wasn't quite so special and they didn't know everything. At first, though, they too would insist that they saw what they said they saw.

"Blue and green and even some pinks," the kid would respond to that first question.

"Blue like the sky?"

"No, it was not blue like the sky. It was at night."

"Exactly, how could you see colors in the black of night?"

"They glowed."

"Glowed?"

"Yes, like embers glow."

"A fire's embers aren't blue or green or pink."

And the kid would have to concede that point even though they felt they were still right.

"And what about these greens? Green like trees or leaves?"

"No, not like that at all."

"A glowing green?" one of the more skeptical adults asked sarcastically.

"Yes!" the kid would answer. And here even the most sure would start to doubt. Would start to wish that the sky would explode with colors even though by now it was well into the morning, and the sky was a pale blue, so unlike what they had seen during the night. Right? They had seen it. They had.

He wasn't sure if the original people who lived in the north – he usually imagined it was present-day Canada, even though he could just as well have imagined Scandinavia or northern Russia and he didn't quite know why he chose Canada. Probably because it seemed familiar. Like his mom, he had never been there. He hadn't been to Finland or Norway or Russia either. But he had seen pictures of Canada – more than those other places and so it became the default setting. More out of habit than any real affinity for Canada. At any rate, he didn't know if the original people had medicine men or other types of shaman. He should know this. He'd taken that ancient cultures course as an undergrad. And there was the internet of course. He could have googled a specific century and a particular geography and got more or less of a census of the tribes that were there and what their social organization and cultural

beliefs were. Though what was the fun of that? Incomplete information was imagination's fuel. He knew that from his childhood when he and his friends would pick up a nugget of fact and create worlds with it. But usually that's where the story ended. With the kid unsure and the tribe elders prescribing a visit to the medicine man.

Not always, though.

*

"Wake up, honey. We're there," he heard his mother say and felt the gentle pressure of her touch on his shoulder. He remembered what had happened - getting woken up and getting in the car to see something called the northern lights and driving away from the streetlights of the town and into the dark. So that's what he expected to see. Darkness.

That is not what he saw.

These days, so many years later, he knew what he saw and why he saw what he saw. Or at least he knew more or less the explanation that science gave for what he had seen. The curtains of colors. The greens and blues and pinks in marvelous shades. Back then it was different. Back then in that particular moment, he didn't know what he was seeing. The night was moving. And that movement had colors. Ones he had never seen.

"Isn't it beautiful," his mom said, having already turned away from him and looking out into the sky.

He thought his mom was pretty. And she was. He confirmed that later when he knew more and saw pictures of her from that time. He saw the symmetry of her features then. The appealing roundness of her figure. The things that other men looked at surreptitiously when she was with her husband and they thought he wasn't aware of their gaze or that they plainly ogled when she was by herself in public. That he understood later. Then, though, he thought she was pretty because she obviously

loved him and did things like making his favorite sloppy joes more often than his father would have liked or taking his temperature extra gently and putting soothing cold compresses on his forehead when he had strep throat. That was pretty to him.

These lights though. What were they? He wanted to see more than he could through the narrow frame of the car's windshield and from his perch in the back seat. He saw the lights falling in sheets. Did they touch somewhere? Could he stand in that light and would it be cold or warm? Warm like when his mom stood him on the bathroom counter after his bath so she could dry him better without straining her back and he felt the warmth from both the towel and the lamp above the bathroom mirror. Or cold like the days when he could see his breath outside and he had to wear mittens and a hat that scratched.

He undid his seatbelt and, while his parents were entranced by what they saw and not paying attention, he slipped out of the car. He crossed the sharp gravel of the shoulder and the soft dirt of the ditch, running out into the prickly grass of the field after the lights.

*

The lights' intensity dimmed slightly, breaking the spell. She turned from her enthrallment to her son. She wanted to see the look in his eyes and his face bathed in the multicolored glow. When she didn't see him immediately, she assumed of course that he had fallen asleep and was slumped in the shadows.

"Charlie, honey . . ." she said just to make sure. There was no answer which was scary. She moved quickly then.

"Turn on the dome light."

"Why?" her husband protested. "My eyes have adjusted. It's so beautiful. Amazing," and he reached over to squeeze her hand.

She slapped it away and reached for the light herself, struggling to

turn it on. "Why isn't this working?" she demanded.

"Here let me." This time he was the one who slapped, getting her hand out of the way. Pale white light filled the car. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

All the shadows gone, she could see her son wasn't in the back seat. "Charlie? Charlie?" she called anyway as if there were hidden parts of the car that only a child would know and where he might be.

"What do you mean, 'Charlie, Charlie.' Isn't he there?"

"No, no. He's not there."

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone," she said, wondering if she could slow time so her husband could catch up. She saw the car door now. It was ajar. She pointed to it, "Did he go that way? Out into the field?"

"Godammit, that kid," he said, getting out of the car. "There's a quarry out that way."

"It's fenced, right?"

"Maybe . . ."

"Christ!"

They ran out into the field under the shimmering sky, calling his name.

*

At first he ran straight out into the field. The grass was damp with evening dew and soon his pjs were damp too. He didn't notice. All he had eyes for was the sky and its color. He had never seen colors like this. Not even on TV which really had a lot of different colors, especially the cartoons on Saturday mornings. He started running around in circles, arms outstretched like he wanted to grab everything he could see and

pull it to himself. The dark and the blues, pinks, and greens and the stars that must be up there too. He got dizzy and the colors blended together, washing over his eyes. He fell down, laughing and breathing heavily. When his head cleared he got back up and started running again. He wanted to see how far the lights went. He wondered if he could run forever. He hoped he could run forever.

*

"Charlie," they yelled, running straight out into the field. The grass wet the legs of his pajamas and the hem of her nightgown but they didn't notice. They ran side by side, although it would have made more sense to split up surely. They could have covered more ground that way. They didn't. Because they feared losing each other like they had lost their son. And more than that because if something awful had happened, they wanted to experience it together. Right at the same time. In the same breath. With the same eyes. They didn't want to subject the other or be subjected themselves to those awful seconds between the time one of them discovered the scene and the other had to rush over to become a witness too.

"How far is the quarry?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Are you sure it's here?"

"Positive. Positive! Run faster."

"Charlie!"

"Charlie!"

"It's fenced right?"

"I don't know."

"He would stop before then," she tried to reason.

A breeze rippled the grasses.

"Charlie, Charlie. Please listen. There's danger!" She stopped, her arms hanging at her sides.

He ran a few strides past her and stopped too. He turned back to his wife, his franticness mirrored in her pale face. He put his hands on his knees, breathing heavily.

They stood like that, the breeze cooling their damp clothes.

Sometime earlier the sun ejected a particularly large amount of plasma. It sped through the cold black at millions of miles an hour to reach earth as Charlie's parents briefly paused their search. The sun's particles, still excited even after those millions of miles, slammed into the earth's thin upper atmosphere, exciting in turn millions, billions, trillions of oxygen and nitrogen atoms. They glowed fiercely, lighting up a significant portion of the earth, including the field where the three were. It was like being inside a kaleidoscope.

In the surge of brilliance, she saw him. "There he is." She started to run. "Charlie, Charlie. Stop! There's danger."

He saw his boy too. A short figure sprinting through greens, blues, pinks, and purples. He pelted past his wife, wasting no breath in calling. Intent only on capture.

He caught him, grabbing his arm hard. He just started shouting. "Why? Why? What were you thinking! The quarry. You could have died. Why? Why? What have we always told you?"

She caught up with the two of them and for a moment, didn't intercede, sharing the angry relief and feeling the squeeze on the boy's arm as if she was squeezing herself.

He shook his arm to loosen his father's grip. He heard the desperation in his dad's voice without fully understanding it. He did

understand enough to know that he needed to give an answer. He looked past his dad to the sky, pointed to the lights, which had receded further up into the darkness and were no longer setting the field ablaze. "I wanted to see if I could follow the lights forever."

His father let his arm drop, and his mom knelt down and hugged him tightly.

"I know what beautiful is, mom," he said, "Why is it so beautiful?"

*

At those times when he imagined the story continued, in other words, when he pictured the kid not giving up, he imagined the kid stood there cold and alone. He also always imagined it was a girl. The members of the tribe or clan or whatever kind of grouping it was, had turned away from her, shaking their heads in continued disbelief and turning now to the early morning tasks they had postponed to hear the story they had, in the end, rather gleefully rejected. She was cold because it was still fairly early in the morning and also because it wasn't summertime but late fall, and the mornings were cold and foretold of colder times to come.

Alone, shivering slightly, he sometimes imagined her crying. Not often, though. It was likely that a kid, having been disbelieved and rejected by the people closest to her, would be despondent and that her despondency would turn into tears. It also seemed rather cliché too, and he tried hard not to let himself narrate the story along those lines.

He liked it better when the path of his fantasy went in another direction and the kid's rejection turned into resolve. Determined to share her experience and find someone who would believe her, she left the camp that very same day, heading south from what is present-day Canada in the direction of the present-day United States.

That's also why he imagined that it was a girl who decided to leave

and continue the story. Boys had too much to lose. Being male, they could count on an elevated status in the group like being the best hunter or maybe even rising to become chief. They'd be willing to take some risks. For example, sneaking out of camp at night to look at the sky. But they wouldn't leave and risk the future benefits of their gender assigned to them by their tribe's patriarchal culture. Although that's probably not how they would have explained it to themselves, he realized.

A young girl, being female, had less to lose in terms of future status he felt. This realization, even if it wasn't fully formed in someone still quite young, inclined her to say to herself, "Okay, don't believe me then. I don't care!" Plus even back then, there would be spunky girls. Girls who felt an inner drive to brave something new, to follow her own path.

She decided to find other people to tell. She knew there were other people out there because that is what the elders in her group said. At night around campfires, they would tell of the other people who walked the fields and forests. Some were like them, but some sounded odd. Ones who could fly. And giants as tall as the tallest pine trees. Although she had never heard a story about them, she was hoping there were also flying giants and that she would find some because maybe they could fly her up to the lights themselves.

It was a hard journey. She left on an impulse and didn't take some things that would have been useful like a second fur wrap or more dried elk meat. The going was slow because there weren't any roads or anything like that. He had to remind himself of that now and again.

He imagined her being grateful when she emerged from the forest onto a wide plain that stretched very far. An ocean of grass. He was sometimes tempted to have her see the lights again to strengthen her resolve which would naturally begin to flag. But he would resist it. He thought it more impressive if she continued on powered only by that one

sighting. So he pictured her traveling and sleeping under overcast skies. Or if the clouds cleared, the nights remained simply dark, illuminated only by the monochrome white of the stars and moon.

He never imagined her finding anyone. After all, the world at the time was rather empty. She didn't give up though, and he admired that. So brilliant and new had the display been that it drove her ever forward. She believed that if she could find someone and tell her story that they would want something like that to be real so they could see it too. That's how the story always ended. The grass plain ran its course and the forest started again. She would hesitate for a moment, looking for a way in. Then when she found it, she'd push ahead. He watched her go, getting smaller and harder to see.

100



UNHUMAN
ALAN KIM

101



THANKSGIVING 1957

NANCY SANTOS

—after Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943)

Stomping off snow before
the threshold, I'm shaking
in anticipation of deviled eggs
and a family room of football games
where laughter levitates.

Sitting around the table,
we're all smiles and spun sugar
until conversation catapults
to communists and color,
spilling sin from silver ladles.

Parents pass blame in bowls
of mashed potatoes, placing
all world wrongs on the gall
of green bean casserole.

We can't carve contrition
from a tainted tradition,
dysfunction and deception
dripping gravy on the dressing,
cranberry sauce staining cloth,
begging for bleaching
of blood boiled in bone broth.

For dessert, I withhold my words
when kids are seen not heard,

waiting on a wishbone,
choking on cigar smoke,
shifting in my seat,
wondering why we're still fighting
over white and dark meat,
binging basic necessities,
never mind humanity,

sending me sink side, scraping
disgrace from plates, but disdain
doesn't disappear in drains,
and turkey dies in Tupperware.
I'm eager for an elsewhere escape,
away from forks pointing at faces,
as nobody's learned a thing about grace.



SUNRISE OVER LOS ANGELES

LAWRENCE BRIDGES

THINGS I SAY WHEN NO ONE'S LISTENING

MEG TAYLOR

Oh, I've done so many things
I can't keep them straight.
What a life,
to forget your own chapters,
to laugh at the blur,
to know you've lived.

The trees out my window
shed their memories too,
gold, copper,
a pile of proof
you don't need to hold on
to everything.

Sometimes, I want to say,
I don't know you
well enough
to be upset by you.
What a boundary.
What a spine
carved from peace
and pumpkin bread.

I watch myself
in store windows,
layered up
in someone else's sweater,

not for vanity,
but proof.
That I'm here.
That I made it
without their map.

I used to think
confidence would land
like lightning.
Now I know,
it's more like a pulse
beneath the skin,
like the last cricket
singing in October.
Not loud.
But steady.
And mine.

DESCENT
JOEL M. SCINTA

OCTOBER'S SECRET ADMIRATION

ABBY PULLAN

The trees are staging their spectacular surrender this season, whispering wonderful secrets in languages only clever squirrels comprehend, whilst the wind weaves warm whispers between golden branches about who's gathering the most glorious acorns.

I caught my shadow stretching slowly, savouring yesterday's dying light, reaching romantically for summer's sweet memory buried beneath beautiful, burnished leaves, or maybe it's simply satisfied following my footsteps through fallen foliage.

The pumpkins parade proudly at the grocery store, plump spheres of perfect possibility rolling their knowing eyes at my pretence of not caring whilst I'm secretly planning elaborate carved creations and cosy autumn evenings.

My heating bill arrives adorned in autumn attire, disguised as daunting expense but underneath it's actually autumn's invitation to curl up in cardigans and create a cocoon of comfort against the cooling air.

The darkness descends deliciously earlier each evening, sliding softly through my windows at 5pm like a welcome friend who arrives with wine and whispered promises of flickering fireplaces and fuzzy socks.

But I've discovered the delightful, secret power of fairy lights, tiny twinkling soldiers celebrating autumn's cosy conspiracy, strung strategically across my ceiling in constellations that quietly spell "yes please, seasonal serenity."

So,

here's to the conspiracy of shorter, sweeter days, to embracing evening's early arrival and the radical act of buying boundless candles in flavours that perfectly capture autumn's aromatic alchemy.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Kenneth Pobo lives in Media, Pennsylvania, with his husband. He grew up in Illinois, but has been in Pennsylvania since 1987 and is now retired. His most recent book is called *At The Window, Silence* (Fernwood Press).

CLS Sandoval, PhD (she/her) is a writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches, and rarely relaxes. She's presented at communication conferences, lead writing and performance workshops, served as a poetry and flash editor, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections, three chapbooks, and both flash and poetry pieces in literary journals, recently including *Opiate Magazine*, *The Journal of Radical Wonder*, and *A Moon of One's Own*. She is raising her daughter, son, and dog with her husband in Walnut, CA.

Frances Fish's passion lies behind a camera. When not exploring the abandoned places in the California desert, Frances enjoys the beauty of nature in all its forms. The work of Frances Fish has been published in multiple magazines, and in a previous life, she was also a novelist, publishing seven novels, though under a pseudonym.

Isabella Suell is a graduate from Millsaps College and local Jackson resident with a degree in English Literature and Anthropology. She runs a freelance photography business in Jackson, MS. She has been published in literary journals- most recently 'In Parenthesis'- and on literary magazine covers. She has been a feature in the art exhibition for PSYCHE science based art gallery. She has won a national gold key for her photography from the Scholastic Art and Writing Competition alongside an award for her writing portfolio. She has created an emerging zine series called "Follow the Art: Follow the Story" for local Jackson arts.

Larissa Monique Hauck is a queer visual artist with a BFA with Distinction from the Alberta University of the Arts (2014) and a B.Ed. from the University of Calgary (2023). She has been included in events such as Nextfest 2018 (Edmonton, AB), Nuit Rose 2016 (Toronto, ON), and the 9th Annual New York City Poetry Festival 2019 (New York, US). Her drawings and paintings continue to be featured in publications such as Creative Quarterly (US), Boomer Magazine (UK), Minerva Rising (US), and various others. She is currently based in Treaty 6 Territory (Edmonton, AB).

Matthew McCain is an author and fine artist with 3 of his novels reaching the top #10 on Amazon Kindle Unlimited. His fine art paintings can be found all around the world from London to Las Vegas with Bar Rescue's Jon Tafer and Alice Cooper's Teen Youth Rock Center in Phoenix, Arizona. He's currently represented by the Bilotta Gallery in Florida.

Gael Blake lives in the Carolina's. She often uses her photography as inspiration for her short stories and poetry. Living in the Carolina's has its advantages such as a wide range of subjects to photograph. She has received several awards for her photography. She is a graduate of the University of South Carolina Upstate Campus. And her posts are often seen on Facebook where she posts new books and writing awards.

Joshua Adam Walker is a freelance poet living with schizoaffective disorder in Oklahoma City. Writing as The Last Bard, his poetry blends personal myth, memory, and survival into a raw, lyrical voice that bridges the sacred and the everyday. His work appears in Potomac Review, Solarpunk Magazine, Southern Florida Poetry Journal, Libre, Kelp Journal, and many others. Known for his emotional intensity and fiercely independent vision, Walker is one of the most widely followed freelance poets online, with over 310,000 readers across platforms. His work often explores class, resilience, neurodivergence, and the fragile beauty found in darkness.

Suwon Choi is a photographer.

Meg Taylor is a longtime writer and first-time submitter, finally sharing decades of quiet words with the world. Her poetry explores emotional residue, inner conflict, and hard-won clarity with humor tucked beneath the ache. After years of letting work consume her identity, she's now choosing expression over suppression, one poem at a time. She's still learning to believe the kind things people say about her, but she's writing like they might be true. Her Instagram handle is haney2cute

Teresa Blake is a photographer and acrylic painter whose creative journey began at twelve with a birthday Polaroid. What started as a love for capturing moments grew during the COVID-19 lockdown, when she began painting from her own images. Though drawn to mountains and water, she discovered her deepest inspiration in the forest, seeing trees as expressive beings with unique personalities. Hours spent observing wildlife from a tree stand shaped her attention to texture, light, and detail. Her work has appeared at Gallery 120 and Photographer's Place. She lives in Lake Wylie, SC, with her husband, Robert.

Alan Kim is a visual artist who investigates the line between technology and humanity. Using paint and conceptual sculpture, he creates artwork that illustrates how life on the internet can make people feel disconnected. He typically uses broken or dehumanized structures trapped in wires, circuits, or virtual spaces to illustrate how technology transforms the manner in which we see ourselves, our bodies, and our feelings.

Robin Young is an artist based in Borrego Springs, California, working primarily in mixed media with a strong focus on collage and contemporary art. Using magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, feathers, jewelry, foil, and more, she creates intuitive, whimsical compositions that explore the strange and the playful. Her work ranges from life-sized pieces and 3D sculptures to intimate postcard collages, all shaped by her sharp aesthetic and instinct for visual storytelling. By repurposing nostalgic imagery into lighthearted yet sometimes unsettling narratives, Robin builds a semi-readymade world that is funky, provocative, and irresistibly captivating.

Ashley Patrice hails from Pontiac, MI, where she began writing poetry at thirteen. She has a chapbook (*Adoration*, 2021) available through Dorrance Publishing Company. Her poems have appeared in Ranger Magazine Issue #4, WILDsound Festival for poetry, and Central Review. Patrice is a graduate of Central Michigan University, where she pursued a bachelor's degree in English Literature, Language, alongside a Creative Writing Certificate. She received her master's degree in creative writing in May 2025.

Joel M. Scinta is a photographer from Buffalo, NY. His work has appeared in publications such as Shots Magazine, The Word's Faire and Audience Askew Literary Journal. His portfolio can be found at www.joelmscinta.com.

Abby Pullan is a poet from West Yorkshire whose work explores the intersections of politics, memory, and survival. Her debut collection *Bread & Blood* examines contemporary Britain through raw lyricism, satire, and urgency, blending personal grief with collective struggle. Writing in a voice that is both fierce and vulnerable, she uses fragmented forms, repetition, and vivid imagery to confront societal decay while holding space for resilience. Her work appears in *Wingless Dreamer*, *Thirty West Publishing House*, *The Words Faire*, and *Gyroscope Review*. A Creative Writing student at the University of Huddersfield, she also performs locally and shares her work on Instagram @abbypullanlitandpoetry.

Fatemeh Mousavi is a passionate young Persian reader, learner, and poet. She is on a journey through the enchanting literary world, currently studying for a Master's in English Literature. Several of her poems have been published in various multilingual literary magazines. She also works as an editor, translator, and proofreader for the Quasar Journal. Fatemeh wishes to be the voice of the voiceless, representing both hope and despair, and would love to connect with fellow lovers of poetry.

Rory Brouillard is from Buffalo, NY but has recently moved to Philadelphia, NY. She is a recent graduate from Duquesne University where she has been published in their student literary magazine. Rory is a current preschool teacher, but continues to write and grow in her free time.

Nancy Santos is a poet from Washington, whose poetry is often inspired by art, music, film, and history. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming with *Riza Press*, *Write Under the Moon*, *Dark Poets Club*, *Carmalarky*, *Moon Tide Press*, and elsewhere. She can be found at nancysantospoetry.com

Liana Meyer is a visual artist based in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines. Working primarily with acrylics, she creates expressive abstract and botanical works that explore themes of healing, emotion, and quiet transformation. Her intuitive process layers color, texture, and movement to reflect both spiritual depth and the beauty found in imperfection. After rediscovering painting mid-career, Liana founded *Mango Mornings Artworks* as a way to share her second chapter in creativity. Her work invites stillness, connection, and inspiration—encouraging viewers to find beauty in life's transitions and resilience in complexity.

Ayshe Dengtash was born in the United Kingdom to Cypriot parents and holds an MA and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Birmingham. Her debut novel, *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*, was published in 2020. Her short work appears in *Faultline*, *Hare's Paw*, *Sunspot Literary Journal*, *Newfound*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, *Quibble Lit*, and more. Her second novel, *Away*, has been longlisted or recognized by multiple presses and prizes. She currently lives in Cyprus. Instagram: ayshe_dengtash.

Kyler Akagi is a writer from Kansas City, Kansas. He spent his childhood in Minnesota. His poetry has been published in *Wingless Dreamer*.

Gregory O'Neill lives in Washington State, on the shores of Puget Sound. He believes poetry offers a navigation system for both art and artist. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications, with new forthcoming in *Cathexis Northwest Press* and *Closed Eye Open*. He is drawn to imagery that blends the mythic and the domestic, at times letting surreal metaphors echo through reflections on connection, memory, identity, tenderness, and the porous borders between self and environment.

Julie Epp was born and raised in Abbotsford, BC, where her early connection to art and nature shaped her creative path. A graduate of the University of the Fraser Valley with a BFA, she develops serene, surreal portraits that explore emotion, memory, and the hidden facets of identity. Working primarily in watercolour on paper, she blends dreams with inner landscapes, often surrounding her figures with evocative natural elements. Her layered technique, influenced by graphite drawing, reveals subtle depths beneath the surface. For Julie, painting is both meditation and transformation, inviting viewers toward stillness, empathy, and deeper self-reflection.

Lawrence Bridges is best known for work in the film and literary world. His photographs have recently appeared in the Las Laguna Art Gallery 2023, Humana Obscura, , the London Photo Festival, Light Space & Time Art Gallery, and the ENSO Art Gallery in Malibu, California. He created a series of literary documentaries for the National Endowment for the Arts “Big Read” initiative, which includes profiles of Ray Bradbury, Amy Tan, Tobias Wolff, and Cynthia Ozick. He lives in Los Angeles.

John Brady, based in Portland, is the author of *Golden Palms*, a noir novel set amid the grit and absurdity of LA politics. His work—both fiction and nonfiction—has appeared in a wide range of outlets, including *hyphen punk*, *Allium*, *Exposition Review*, *pioneertown*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Pomona Valley Review*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Punk Planet*, and on National Public Radio. His writing can be found at johnbradywriter.com.

STAFF

Sage Delio might be considered a modern day renaissance woman, with her diverse interests and talents spanning across the fields of creative writing, computer science, music, and the arts. In May 2022, she published her debut poetry collection, *Blue Confessional: Poetry and Prose*. A second edition of the collection is being adapted with Sage’s own art and illustrations. For *Gabby & Min’s Literary Review*, Sage holds the roles of Editor-In-Chief and Poetry & Prose Editor.

Sharon Fremont is a multifaceted artist and avid book enthusiast. Her artistic journey spans across various mediums, with a particular fondness for the captivating realms of watercolor painting and sketching. Her passion for the written word is equally profound, evident in her dual roles as Managing Editor and Fiction Editor for *Gabby & Min’s Literary Review*.

Karen Porterfield has spent over 24 years working in design. She has established herself as a talented artisan jewelry designer, crafting one-of-a-kind pieces that are highly sought after. Karen’s passion for creating beautiful and innovative designs has led her to achieve a great deal of success in the field. She serves as the Art & Illustrations Editor for *Gabby & Min’s Literary Review*.

Matthew Evan is an accomplished photographer and passionate car enthusiast. He has developed a sharp eye for capturing the beauty and essence of his subjects through his lens. He leads *Gabby & Min’s Literary Review* as the publication’s Photography Editor.

THE QUIET FLAME OF FALL

There is a moment every year when fall reveals itself—not through the first turning leaf or the first cold morning, but through the soft shift in how the world feels. Light thins. Air sharpens. Time stretches in a way that invites us to linger rather than rush. It is as if the season itself takes one slow, deep breath, and asks if we might do the same.

This issue—our tenth—was born in that breath.

Fall has always been a season of thresholds. It marks change, yes, but also clarity. Things become stripped back, pared down to their essential forms. Trees let go of what no longer serves them. Days shorten, asking us to do less, but do it more meaningfully. Even sound changes; footsteps become quieter, wind becomes heavier, moments become more vivid simply because there are fewer of them.

And as I curated the pieces that found their way into this Fall 2025 edition of *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, I was struck by how naturally they echoed that truth. Not deliberately—but almost instinctively, as if each contributor had been listening to the same internal shift, the same quiet flame that fall places in the center of everything.

There is something different about Issue #10. Perhaps it is the milestone itself—double digits, a full circle of ten seasons. Or perhaps it is the tone of the work submitted: deeper, softer, more reflective, carrying a sense of having lived something, learned something, and returned to share it. Whatever the reason, these pages hold a gentler gravity than those before them. They invite—not demand—attention. They whisper, not shout. They burn low, not bright.

And in that low burn, they illuminate.

This season teaches us that illumination isn't always about brilliance.

Sometimes it's about the small ember that refuses to go out. The one that warms hands rather than blinds eyes. The one that keeps us steady through uncertain weather.

That is the energy I felt in the poems and stories collected here: the quiet persistence of creativity, even when the world feels loud outside of it.

But a Closing Article should not only reflect; it should also offer something useful, something practical, something a reader can carry forward. So, in honor of this transitional season, this issue's closing reflection teaches a skill—one I believe fall models beautifully.

The Skill of Intentional Slowness

(*A Creative Discipline for a Fast World*)

Intentional Slowness is not laziness, nor passivity, nor avoidance. It is an active practice of choosing presence over pace.

It asks us to participate in our own moments fully, instead of skimming across the surface of them. It is a skill because it takes discipline. It is an art because it changes the way we create, read, think, and notice.

Here is the expanded practice—one I've used while editing this very issue...

1. Claim a Daily Pause

Choose one moment each day that belongs fully to you.
Not when the day “allows,” but when *you decide*.

Morning sun on a counter.
Evening air through an open window.
A quiet minute before turning a page.

This pause becomes a doorway, a shift in pace that signals your mind to step out of survival mode and into creative awareness.

2. Journal One Sensory Detail

You do not need a full page or a poetic paragraph. Just **one sensory truth** of your day:

- the sweetness of cold air entering your lungs
- the texture of a thought you didn't expect
- a sound that transported you backwards in time
- a color that caught you when you weren't looking

In noticing details, you teach your brain to recognize beauty before it passes you.

3. Practice “Micro-Uncluttering”

Instead of reorganizing a whole life—or even a whole room—let go of one small thing daily:

- a worry that isn't yours
- a task that isn't necessary
- a self-criticism that has expiry written all over it

Fall teaches release with quiet authority. You can mirror it in increments.

4. Create Without Deadline

Choose something—writing, sketching, photographing, rearranging a desk—and give yourself permission to do it unproductively. Not for a project. Not for an audience. Not for improvement.

Just because it feels like lighting a candle in a dim room.

5. Read Slowly, Not Wide

Pick one piece from this issue to revisit. Not skim—*revisit*. Choose a line that lingers. Let it follow you for a day.

Slow reading is a forgotten craft, but fall encourages it. Pages turn differently when daylight grows scarce.

Intentional Slowness doesn't erase responsibility, but it reshapes your relationship with time—and with yourself. It nurtures presence, which fuels creativity, which deepens connection. And connection is at the heart of literature.

This issue reflects that. Our contributors lead us through haunted rooms, fractured memories, and quiet transformations—work that reveals itself gradually to readers willing to slow down. I hope you approach these pages with the same intention and openness with which they were created.

As we close Issue #10, my gratitude goes to our readers, our contributors, and the creative community that sustains this publication. Ten issues mark not just time, but collaboration, endurance, and belief in storytelling.

Fall will soon yield to winter, but its quiet flame—the steady light of transition—remains. May it warm your thoughts and guide you gently into what comes next.

With gratitude and autumn light,
Sage Delio
 Editor-In-Chief

END

