



Ink ⚡ Storm

Ink Storm

ENG 273 Publishing and the Profession, Creative Writing Program Monroe Community College, May 2023 Digital Edition

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Markus

Leona Taylor

"Wait up Lukas!" a young boy yelled. He was answered with a smirk from the other boy. Lukas ran farther into the rows of tall trees.

"Idiot! Your dads gonna be pissed at you!" Was he being ignored? His question was answered by the thumping of excited steps and the visage of ear-length hair bouncing with each motion. By the time he caught up to Lukas, the boy had halted in front of a large tree, the blonde leaned against it cockily.

"Luk...A tree? You...you had me running all the way...from your house for a-a tree?" Marcus struggled to speak, immensely out of breath. The eerie swishing sound of wind brushed against the forest trees. Lucas shook his head, a large grin on his face. The boy grabbed his shoulders and guided him to stand on a specific point on the ground.

"What?" Markus asked him. The other boy rolled his eyes, kicking the ground firmly. The echo of wood above a strangely bright patch of grass thudded below their feet.

"Oh shit! Is that a bunker!?" Marcus asked the other boy. Lukas smirks proudly.

"Not just a bunker. A bunker house!" He shouts.

"Woah! Who's house?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know, nobody's been in there for a while but me." Lukas answers with a nonchalant shrug.

"Wait- It's abandoned?" Marcus asked, suddenly concerned.

"Yep. And we're gonna explore it." Lukas's eyes held a devious shine, stepping back to pull the door up. The two look in. Pure darkness, save for a glimpse of old brick and dusty wooden steps. The brunette took a step back, shaking his head.

"Oh no, no way. There's ghosts in there." Marcus stated in protest.

"MmHMm, yes we are! I'll fight all those ghosts, this is our new hideout." The boy responded whilst nodding his head. He grabs the other boy's hand with an alarming vigor, starting to drag him forward.

"Lukas, why don't we just build a treehouse!?" Marcus's question halts the other boy's movement as he gives a long pause for thought.

"Come on, it's really cool let me show youuu!" He pulled the other boy with as much force as he could muster.

"Noooo!" Marcus whines, digging his shoes into the dirt so he doesn't have to follow along with him.

Marcus huffed, "You're gonna get me in trouble with Mrs. Inkvitch! I'm not supposed to be away too long! Especially if I die! She'd be super pissed!" Marcus rambled with panic, his hands shooting out to break his fall.

"You're not gonna die oh my god. And If she's mad, you can just live with me and my dad. He's not as mean as she is, so no worries!" Lukas chimed.

The other boy shakes his head. "No! He doesn't like people over! You're gonna get in trouble again!"

Lukas rolled his eyes, walking him down the rickety steps. A sense of wonder riddles his body. Marcus looked back at the path they were on. He huffed in annoyance; he was always a sucker when it came to pressure.

Immediately after Marcus came down, Lukas shut the top. The room was suddenly lost in darkness, a long shriek from Marcus alerting the other boy.

"Marcus! Marcus shut up! I have a flashlight!" Lukas shouted, the click of the button easing the other boys anxiety temporarily.

"Chicken shit." He chuckled, much to Marcus's annoyance.

"This is the last time I let you talk me into trouble. I swear. If we make it out alive, I'm not doing this again." Marcus mumbled.

"Yeah yeah..." Lukas answered.

Right by the stairs, Lukas was getting excited to show his findings. He spotted a broken mirror on the floor, triggering an idea like a light being turned on. He would love to give Marcus a fright. He didn't expect the big chicken to be right behind him so suddenly, however. He jumped slightly, with Marcus too nervous to notice.

"Can we go? Your point is proven. You have the brave hero points...this is trespassing..." Marcus warned the other boy, a long whine of worry leaving his lips.

"Trespassing? Nobody lives here anymore! If they were worried about trespassers there'd be a sign or something...and their house wouldn't be underground..." Lukas began moving toward the living room. "Look at all this stuff. Hey!" His eyes scan a flimsy living room set-up. There's a bunch of clothes covering the table! Woooo spookyyy!" He nudges the nervous boy beside him. "Maybe...oh shit! Dude! Do you see this?" He chimed.

Marcus had his eyes covered. "What is it?" He asked. Lukas rolled his eyes, shaking the other boy so he could see better.

"There's a knife in the chair! Look! Maybe somebody was pissed off." Lukas teased, a giggle escaping him as he continued investigating.

Marcus's heart picked up. "Seriously Lukas...this is the exact kind of place where people go missing. Like that l-" Marcus was interrupted.

"Like that lady who went missing years ago? Yeah, you say that all the time. That's like the only murder crime around here, we'll be fine." Lukas rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious! This is scary!" Marcus continued to try and reason.

"Oh my god stop being a baby, I looked through half of the place this morning. There's no danger. If you're that scared, go outside." Lukas stated, slightly annoyed.

"I can't leave you here, your dad will be worried. Plus...I'm always with you. The first suspect in a missing persons case is the last person who saw them! Especially since I'm an orphan, they're gonna say I was jealous of yo-" Marcus was interrupted again.

Lukas slapped his back "No one thinks like that, you're spooking yourself." He rubs his back to comfort him. "Listen, If you go in every room with me, I'll ask my dad to buy you ice cream. And don't give me that 'but Mrs. Inkvitch' stuff either." He negotiated, an expectant expression on his face.

Marcus let out a huff of worry, but he nodded.

The exploration was a long sequence of Lukas's teasing and Marcus's continued worrying. Room after room, a cobweb-ridden hollow shell. Each creaky step on the old wooden floors only served to bore Lukas. He still wasn't satisfied, dragging the other boy toward the stairs.

"There's more down here! Come on!" He commanded.

"Lukas I've really seen enough..." Marcus mumbled, taking a moment to look back up at the stairs in the opposite direction, the crack of light which would've led him to the safety of the outdoors. He sighed.

Lukas ignored him, ushering the other boy down the steps and into a long dreary hallway. If it was too dim before, now the room was pitch black in every direction. Marcus reached for the flashlight in the other boys hand, only for it to be slapped away. Lukas paused only upon spotting a trail of fabric leading into the farthest room from the surface; it appeared to be a dress.

"Woh..." the boy let out in awe. Marcus, biting his nails nervously behind him. The poor boy's hands were shaking but he still followed along. The two walked all the way down with slow, cautionary steps. Just outside the door was a mess of glass on the floor. To the left of this mess was the ombre of clear glass to dark red.

Marcus, immediately upon seeing this turned around and rushed toward the stairs. Lukas followed after him, grabbing his arm.

Marcus shrieked, starting to hyperventilate. Lukas grabbed both of his shoulders with his hands, trying to get his attention.

"Marcus, relax! Relax! Calm down!" He assured.

"Hell no! Hell! No! Are you insane!? You said there's no danger! What in the fuck is this!?" Marcus shouted, only for Lukas to shoosh him.

"Will you stop!? I said half of the house had no danger! I was waiting to go down here with you!" Lukas answers him, his own heart thudding in his chest.

"How the hell is that supposed to make me feel better!?" Marcus asked.

"I locked the door." Lukas stated blankly.

"You what!?" Marcus shouted.

"I locked it! So you have to come with me or I won't open it." Lukas answered.

"I'm gonna fuckin kill you!" Marcus charged at him, ready to search his pockets. Lukas pulls the key out of his pocket swiftly, lifting it in the air.

“Aht! Aht! No! I’ll eat it!” His other hand points in front of him with the flashlight to stop him. Marcus stops in his tracks.

“Are you kidding me!? You’re seriously gonna-“ Marcus asks, wide-eyed.

“I will! I will do it!” Lukas announces.

“I can’t believe you! You’re really an asshole! I’m terrified right now!” Marcus cries out.

“I know! I know! I’ll make it up to you! I swear!” the other boy shouts.

“With what Lukas? Ice cream!? You think It’s gonna taste good If we’re fucking dead!?” Marcus yells.

“I’ll think of something! I swear! Just come on! I can’t go alone!” Lukas begs him. Marcus sighs, snatching the flashlight from him and pushing the other boy forward. Lukas gives him a small thanks before they take in the doorway again.

“Lukas...” Marcus let out, his voice shaking. “I think that’s...” Lukas just stares at it, the stained glass on the floor. He ignored him, ready to investigate further before the other boy grabs his arm and halts his movement completely.

"No! Lukas, I’m sorry, This is enough! We cannot do this!" He tried to reason with him, only for him to shake his hand off.

"For fucks sake Marcus, we’ve barely found anything! Quit being a punk! For someone who’s so scared of my dad, you sure do act like the chicken-shit!" His words stung Marcus, a telltale sign by his upturned eyebrows. He doesn’t move or look up.

"Listen, I know you hate your parents, I get it. But acting unafraid isn’t gonna change anything! It’s not!" Marcus exclaimed.

“Marcus, shut up, seriously. Don’t talk about something you don’t even understand.” Another sting from Lukas’s mouth.

“Luk, that is not fair. Not fair at all.” His head snaps up, eyes began to water.

“Look, I’m gonna be brave okay! I’m not...” Lukas starts to say, but he shuts himself down, continuing to walk through the doorway. He pauses his movements before speaking with his back turned. “You come with, or you go back with Mrs. Inkvitch.” Marcus obliged after, completely silent.

The two walked down the dreary hallway and into a dark bedroom at the end. It was an absolute mess from clutter, blood, and destruction. Shards of bloody glass littered the floor.

“Jesus...” Lukas let out. Marcus stepped out immediately. His hands shaking.

“No. No. I’m not doing this. I’m leaving.” Marcus stuttered out, his legs tapping against the rickety floorboards.

“Marcu-” Lukas halted.

He’d been about to follow him, but his eyes caught the view of a fallen dresser and a bunch of scattered Polaroid pictures. They’d been covered in the same dark liquid from before.

“Don- Please stay...” Lukas looked at him with wide eyes. “I...I’m scared too.” He continued. Marcus stared in disbelief.

“Luk, If you’re scared we should just leave...” He tried to reason with him.

“I can’t...I’m sorry...I didn’t tell you.” Lukas started.

“Didn’t tell me what?” The other boy asked.

“My dad...he said that woman in the woods used to scare him...” Lukas answered.

Markus was in disbelief. “Which one Lukas? I swear to god!”

“The one who confesse- “ His words were interrupted.

“To making that lady go missing!?” Markus asked.

“Ye-“ Lukas was cut off again.

“Lukas are you insane!? You brought me out here to look for the crazy bitch’s house!? You know they said she killed people out here right!? You kno-“ Marcus heaved.

“Marcus, she’s in prison, she isn’t around here anym-“ The other boy tried to sooth him.

“You don’t know what the fuck is out here man! You don-“ Markus stopped.

Lukas raised a photograph from the floor, handing it out to him. Marcus shivered, moving in slowly behind the other boy. Lukas didn’t move, his body rigid and stiff. He wasn't there completely.

He pulled another photograph from his pocket. Two photos. His father and mother, and his father with the woman on the news. He suddenly dropped both pictures, breaking down in shrieks and sobs.

Marcus came rushing to his aid. “What!? What’s wrong!?” He asked, crouching just in front of him.

"He lied to me! He lied!" He cries aloud. The other boy’s arms wrapped around him.

“What? What did he lie about?” Lukas asks, trying to calm his own voice. Marcus hugged him back, sobbing.

“All this time...I was so angry...all those times where I threatened to burn the picture...” Lucas mumbled.

“The one of your parents?” Marcus asks, concerned.

“I didn’t want to keep a picture of someone who abandoned me...but she’s...she’s dead...” He mumbled. Before Marcus could comfort him, his eyes scanned a letter on the floor. He took a moment to look over at Lukas's broken form before returning to the paper.

He let out an audible gasp, alerting Lukas, who stopped glaring at the pictures before him. Lukas had concern through his tears.

Marcus read the words very slowly. “He’s mine. Screw the cost. My son will find him, Marcus, my great angel. Not even bars could keep him away.” The boy stared wide-eyed at the paper. The woman on the television...that was...no. His birth mother...she wasn’t...

But his name was Marcus. His mother was in prison! Mrs. Inkvitch told him his father left him at the orphanage when he was born!

He looked at the blonde with tears in his eyes. "Lukas... We should leave..." He mumbled.

Lukas nodded.

Echidna

Ryan Guerin

The girl ran down the dim hall, panting and sniffling. Her white gown flapped wildly around her. Alarms screamed throughout the complex, piercingly loud on the concrete walls. The normally gray corridor was bathed in red from the emergency lighting, the power having died long ago. Along the walls, screens repeated the same message in flashing text. **Warning! Subject has breached containment. Evacuate immediately.**

Run run no time it's behind me help! The frantic and jumbled thoughts of the girl screamed through her mind. Her surroundings blurred from the tears in her eyes. She could hear the wet thwacks and clicks coming from around the corner, as well as a horrifying symphony of groans and screams.

She found herself at a T-junction and looked this way and that, desperately searching for something, anything that could help. *Please oh please oh god I don't want to die*, she babbled hysterically to herself, praying to any and every deity she could think of for help. At the end of the left hall, she could see that the ceiling had collapsed, but the right corridor had a turn up ahead.

Whimpering, she continued her flight. If she remembered correctly, then up ahead was a ray of hope: a heavy-duty blast door. She would be safe if she could get to the other side. From behind, she could hear a predatory scream, and then rapidly hastening thwacks as her pursuer gave chase. She didn't- *couldn't* - look back.

Running around the corner at full tilt, she looked forwards only to see the door right in front of her. Unable to stop in time, she bounced off the harsh metal, stunned and panting. Recovering for a moment was stressful, but she could see that the gate was propped open slightly – just wide enough to crawl through. Quickly shaking off her daze, she dove forwards to crawl underneath the shutter. She had just crawled through when a loud clang was heard as the creature slammed into the wall from around the corner, snarling all the while. A tentacle came whipping underneath the door and she felt it brush against her front as it barely missed, but even that light touch sent her reeling back, her teeth rattling in her skull. Quickly jumping up to press the button on the wall, she sighed as the door sealed shut with a hiss. The creature continued trying to break down the barrier, but it held firm. She was safe.

Trying to calm down, she went to breathe in, but she heard a slight dripping sound. A moist stench of blood and guts permeated the room, becoming noticeable now that she wasn't in immediate danger. Terrified of what she would find, she turned around to see...

Nothing. The room was empty, save for the rows of monitors and the massive screens on the wall. Walking around, she tried to find the source of the smell. It might have been unwise, but she needed to know if it was safe. She didn't find any bodies within, the room was spotless, until she turned around to go back and saw a trail of blood drips, leading straight... to her.

Looking down, she gasped, or rather tried to. Her gown was stained red, ripped away to expose a gaping wound, organs bared to the open air. How was she alive? Her vision cut out on her left side then, and she numbly reached up to poke at the empty socket where her eye used to be.

She felt like retching and screaming and sobbing all at once. The feedback was overwhelming as she collapsed onto the floor. It was so painful, how had she not noticed?! Her vision began to swim as she saw the room for what it really was. Small bodies were strewn across the floor in pieces, dressed in white. A large pile of carcasses formed a nest in the center of the room, the roost of a giant carrion bird. Bits of gore covered the monitors and splattered the walls, reaching even the ceiling. The shredded corpses all seemed to be staring at her, judgmental gazes boring into her soul. *You did this.* They seemed to say. *It's your fault. You reap what you sow.*

Nononoitwasntmeithurtspleasestop! The girl's thoughts were a shattered mess. Whimpering, her tears stung her empty socket further, adding insult to injury.

Suddenly, a slurping shuffle behind her drew her attention, her breath hitching. Tears dripped down her face as she lay there paralyzed with fear. She weakly began sobbing anew, pleading. "n-no, please." She gasped as she felt a gentle brush on the nape of her neck, a wave of heat betraying the great presence behind her. She shivered, trying to brace. Suddenly, her neck exploded in agony, razor-sharp tentacles digging into her flesh. She shrieked, feeling the horrid tendrils slithering under her skin, seeing them writhe across her arms beneath the surface as they began to slowly peel her apart from the inside out. Her mind felt fuzzy, the world slowly going black...

---@---

The sound of footsteps echoed off the silent walls, the soldiers carefully stepping around the bodies. The captain spared barely a glance at the smeared corpses across the ground, hiding a grimace behind his gas mask. They were yet to find any survivors in the facility.

Up ahead, he could see the large bulkhead leading to the Control Center. There was a large dent in it, as if Something had tried to bash it open. He signaled to his men. *Prepare to breach,* he gestured, *quiet entrance. Stack up.* Wordlessly his team complied, their dark grey uniforms jarring against the bright walls.

Moving to either side of the door, the captain input the code, giving his team a countdown. three, two, one. He pressed the button.

The door shuttered, before with a grinding screech that shattered the air, it began to lift. The team tensed, hands tightening the grips of their weapons.

With a sinister hiss, the door shutters to a halt, revealing a bloodbath.

The captain curled his lip, feeling slightly queasy at the sight of the room, covered in pulped guts. He would never look at hamburgers the same way again. With barely a word, his team breached the room.

---@---

The girl reveled in the silence as she preened in her nest. All was quiet. Until it was not.

Noise drifted in from somewhere nearby, catching the girl's attention. She could feel the vibrations of footsteps resonating through the floor. There were trespassers. she hissed in frustration. Who dared to disrupt the silence? They would pay.

She could hear the intruders gathering outside the door before a sharp grinding was heard.

With military efficiency, the trespassers spread out across the room, and she was able to recognize them. They worked for the scientists, keeping her trapped in this hell. She growled softly, catching their attention.

Garbled noises came from them as they communicated, warily approaching her. Just a little closer, she thought. Tensing, she prepared to pounce.

At the last second, however, the prey seemed to realize something was wrong. They all tensed and pointed their tools in her direction, but it was far too late to save them.

Her world exploded in light and sound as she *moved*.

It was over quickly; they were no match for her. Soon she sat over the leader, sating her hunger on his neck.

As she chewed, she cast her senses out, as far as they would go. It was beautiful. Billions of prey, spread out all across the planet. It made her ... so *hungry*. Soon, she thought as she sat back to watch the first of her hive being born. Soon, it will be *ours*.

Blinding Lights

Rosetta Famellette

I'm finally home. I forgot it takes half an hour to drive back from The Hills. Rich people and their housing complex mazes can be such a pain.

Vanessa's lounging on the couch, head snapping towards me as soon as she hears the door.

"Foxy, you're late!" She pouts.

"I'm sorry, the bar gets crowded, and—"

She glares at me, red eyes burning into my skull. "You don't owe James anything. He's a lying jerk, and you know it. When I ask you to come home on time, you come home on time!"

She crosses her arms. I'm in for it if I don't do something. I hang my jacket over a chair and walk over to her, snuggling up to her on our cheap faux leather couch. After growing up in a rich Red Gem household, she never settles for less than luxury. I can't afford to keep it perfect, but I try. We wanna start a life together, she wants to be independent from her father's reputation as a wealthy lawyer and I don't wanna disappoint. I hold her close and kiss her, pouring all my passion into it. I run one hand through her hair, she clings to me like a wet shirt on a hot day. It feels good.

"I missed you so much, baby."

"I missed you too, Foxy."

As we kiss a few more times, she sinks deeper into my arms, her gaze softening. Been a while since we had a moment like this. We used to cuddle all the time when we first met, I found myself entranced in her strength. I wanted her to hold me with it. I let the moment last until I can't stand the silence. "Did you eat dinner?"

"I ordered chicken alfredo, left you a plate in the fridge."

She won't make an effort to learn to cook, so she has to spend the money we need for rent. I head for the kitchen.

"Lemme eat, then we can go have some fun, okay?"

She smiles playfully, going back to looking at her phone while I grab the leftovers. I eat at the island, the only dining space in our apartment. I try my best, but the plate looks too daunting. I can't eat more than a few bites, but I can't waste the food or the money. We sit in silence for minutes that feel like hours.

"You really should quit your job," Vanessa says suddenly, breaking me from my inability to down a piece of pasta.

"Why? I don't have another source of income."

"Then charge everything to a credit card until you get a new job!"

I'm already one hundred thousand jewels in debt. Losing my source of income would make it worse. I barely make the minimum monthly payment and have money left for food,

which I can barely manage to eat. You spend all your money shopping before you can help pay the bills.

“You don’t understand,” I stand up, “I can’t quit, James won’t let me walk out.”

“He’s a liar who only wants to keep you away from me. He’s mind controlling you. He’s a dirty conman like all Green Gems. I bet you’ve been having sex with people for money again!” She stands and takes my hand, pulling me closer. I feel her arms wrap around me. She’s getting impatient.

“You know I hate that. You belong to *me*, Fox,” she pulls me closer to her chest, “You always promise me we’ll have fun when you get home, then you say you’re too tired. You never give me what I want!”

She grabs my chin and forces my head downwards. Her red eyes are engulfed in a fiery rage, one I could never put out. “Vanessa, let go of me—”

Before I understand what’s happening, she slams me against the wall. The room starts spinning. James probably spiked my drink earlier. Wouldn’t be the first time.

Shit.

I can’t hear what she’s saying. My head slams against the wall again. I think she’s pinning me down. I can feel her hands running down my legs. Now my sides. The room’s so blurry, everything’s cold. The only warmth is my necklace, the gemstone pendant thumping against my bare chest as Vanessa moves me around. I only have the energy to grab it and stop its sharp blue edges from cutting me.

“You’re gonna give me what I want whether you like it or not.”

I feel her hot skin pressing against me. Everything looks fuzzy. I feel dizzy. I need to get away.

“Hold still.”

I don’t wanna do this. I’m exhausted. I just wanna put my clothes back on and go for a drive. When I try to move, she pushes me back against the wall, only adding to the pain.

“Blues like you are so fragile. One shove and you submit like a good boy.”

I can’t fight anymore. My legs feel weak. They’re giving out.

I sell myself, it’s all the same.

I’ll forget tomorrow.

★

“You know, she’s a real dog,” James says, a condescending sneer decorating his face, as planned as his crisp suit and clean hair. He leans back in his chair.

“She’s not. She deserves better from me.”

“Vanessa is a trust fund kid, living off her father’s fortune.”

“She sells real estate, her dad cut her off.”

He pauses, “Oh? She must be making millions.”

He bursts into mocking laughter. The green lights in the back room make me feel hot and threatened, as if he's watching me from all sides. Probably because Green Gems have mind-based abilities like mind control, telekinesis, telepathy, mind reading. Whenever I look at the dim lights, they seem to blind me. I can't find it in me to open my mouth and tell him what I think. I avoid his eyes, I fidgeting with my pendant, feeling the rough edges on my finger. I turn it in my hands, watching the green light dull its brilliant blue color.

Foxy, look at me.

When I look up, he's staring me dead in the eyes. I know he's trying to get in my head, control me, but it's hard to combat. I'm tired and sore from last night.

“Go home early tonight and deal with her.”

“Deal with her?”

“Break up with her. There are better partners out there. Guys, girls, who cares? She's not it.”

He hasn't stopped staring, and it glues my mouth shut. He's pushing past my defenses, trying to keep me in his grasp.

Do you really love her?

He glares at me. I'm opening my mouth, but nothing comes out. I just stare back. He shrugs, smiling, “Well, alright then.”

He fixes his tie and leaves. I grab my uniform and change once he's gone. Seeing myself in the mirror makes the feeling of Vanessa's hands creep up my sides. Her long, red nails run down my ribs like a guitar pick over strings, heat scorching my body like the sun on desert sand. It makes me shiver. I put on my uniform, rushing out to the bar. The noise of customers floods my ears, technopop beats in my chest, and hungry eyes scan my body, looking away after seeing the Blue Gem in front of them. I must look green under the lights, a better catch. Before my shift, James slides me a glass of alcohol I'd rather not drink.

Drink it.

I feel my hand moving towards it like a magnet. Pulling back makes the draw stronger.

I promise it'll be good.

I fight harder, hearing him enter my head.

Do I ever make bad drinks?

Giving in, I wrap my fingers around the green tinted glass, putting it to my lips. He smirks at me, winking from behind the bar. I set the glass down, staring at the blue lipstick now smeared on it. What's in this? It's bitter, but I drink until it's empty.

Don't take too long, it's not good to keep customers waiting.

I push the glass back towards him, who wipes the lipstick onto his fingers and blows me a kiss. Disgusted, I turn away to get to work, rubbing my lips together to smooth out my lipstick.

Two hours before closing I start feeling dizzy. Trying to get my balance, I set my hand on the table next to me and feel it slip under my weight. My head hits the floor and pain washes over me. What was in that drink?

“Fox, are you ok?”

James rushes to help me, taking my hand and yanking me on my feet. His conniving green stare meets my eyes.

You're ok, just a little tired.

“Yea, just a little tired.”

“Let me take you to the back,” he says, stabilizing me by resting his hand on my butt. If I had the strength to stand on my own, I'd slap it away, but I don't. All I know is I won't feel any better staying here.

A Blue like you, walking home late at night? You know you'd get yourself shot.

Of course I wouldn't walk, I'd just dri—

You can't drive right now. You can barely stand.

I can't find the strength to get him out of my head either. As he drags me to the back, I feel the heat of the lights on my face, the pressure of the eyes on me. Struggling is futile. When we get there, the noise of the bar dissolves. The music leaves my body, and the disappointed gazes disappear, only to be replaced by a single set of green eyes. Green is a pretty color, but James always makes it seem more sinister than beautiful. Green painted nails creep up my back onto my shoulders and cold cufflinks press into my neck. He pushes me backwards towards something.

I can make you feel better. Release your inhibitions.

A cold hand runs up my neck, and my body relaxes into a chair. It feels nice to be off my feet. Laying my head back, my hair covers my eye as blue fills my vision like a filter over a picture.

Blue and green look nice together, don't they?

He rubs my shoulders, and I hear him humming. He pushes the hair out of my face, smiling down at me. I close my eyes, hoping that'll stop the lights from making my mind spin. Those cursed green lights seem to press me further into the chair, holding me in place.

Rest, Foxy. You'll feel better soon.

I let sleep engulf my mind, and the last thing I notice is more pressure, real pressure, on my lap.

★

“You good for nothing Green Gem!”

Is that Vanessa? How'd she get here? My vision's still blurry.

“Oh, I'm sorry Miss Trust Fund, have I upset you?”

That's James talking. I'm starting to see the scene now. I'm on the floor of the back room, and they're fighting in front of me.

“I didn't come here to be insulted. I'm here because my boyfriend didn't come home, and you were having sex with him!”

Wake up.

I open my eyes and see him looking at me, which Vanessa doesn't like. She grabs his shirt, forcing his attention back to her. He gives her a once over, I'm sure he likes how skimpy she dresses. She's never wearing more than a short skirt and a crop top. He's taking in the view as she pulls down on his tie, forcing him to her level. Bet he likes the choking feeling.

"Don't look at him, look at me! I've got to give you a piece of my mind!"

His cackle fills the room, "Oh sweetie, you're welcome to try."

She grits her teeth while he meets her gaze. "I'm not letting a pervert touch my boyfriend!" She shoves him against the wall, getting him out of her way.

She rushes over to me, grabbing my hand, "What did he do to you?"

You're fine, remember?

"Baby, I'm fine," I say, unable to get up no matter how hard I try.

"You are not! I found you lying here and that slut waiting to see when you'd wake up!"

You probably didn't eat enough today.

"I probably fainted, I didn't eat a lot today."

James walks over, towering above us, "I found him lying on the floor during his shift. Did you want me to leave him there?"

"Why did you pass out?" she demands, her red eyes fixed on me.

You didn't eat enough.

"I told you, I didn't eat--"

"Stop it!" The sound of a slap cuts me off, breaking my gaze from his.

"Oh, so you want to fight?" there's a big red spot on his face, not that he cares. He grabs her shoulders, and she shrinks back.

"You're mind controlling him!"

"It would be too much work on my part. I think he knows where his loyalties lie."

"They lay with me!"

"Lie."

"He's mine, I'm his girlfriend, I love him. Back off."

This fight isn't *about* me. It's *over* me.

"You don't know what love is."

"And you do?"

"What Fox tells me about you isn't love, darling," he hums with a conceited grin, "You use him for power. Everyone knows your daddy isn't the nicest guy, and in your desperate escape you found someone to puppet for yourself. Finally, you can have the power he has over you. Am I wrong, Miss Trust Fund?"

Vanessa growls, “Now you’re in *my* head! Get out!”

That means he’s right and she doesn’t like it. He must be strong, if he can get past her.

“I’m sorry, it’s just a habit.”

“You’re the one who likes having control, you’re projecting it onto me. You don’t know him like I do.”

“I’ve known him for ten years, that’s longer than the two years you’ve known him for.”

“A sadist is what you are. Look at my baby, laying in pain on the floor. And when I walk in here, you’re sitting and watching him suffer, a smile on your face.”

“Sadist? Vanessa, I’m hurt.”

“You like puppeting him, sending him off to fuck people so you can take the money he earns from it.”

“Foxy, I don’t do that, do I?”

I stare at them both, my head still spinning. I’m rubbing my thumb on my blue pendant to ground myself. The lights shine on it, covering half of it in green.

I’d never hurt you, you know that.

“He doesn’t.”

“Come on baby, tell me the truth. You don’t really like this Green Gem scum more than me?” her voice is a whimper. I can’t tell if she’s actually upset or not.

James winks at me, a smirk still decorating his face.

You know you like me more. Just say it, it’s so simple.

And before I know what I’m saying, words spill out of my mouth.

“Of course I like him more. You know how much he’s done for me, teaching me how to survive in this city. I’d be lost if I didn’t have him to guide me, to be a good friend. But that doesn’t mean you’re not important too, baby. I work so hard so we can have a good life together.”

Good boy, Foxy.

She shoves him into me. I fall, crushed under his weight. It’s all too familiar.

“Take him, then! I’m done playing games with Green Gem trash.”

The last I hear of Vanessa is her heels clicking as she storms off, and the slamming of the back room door.

“Baby, wait!”

I try to push James off me. For once he lets me go. Running out the back and onto the main floor, I see the customers have gone home and the bar is closed. Yet in my mind, I can still hear the drunkards and rich people partying and feel their eyes on me. When I get out the front door, she has disappeared. Before I can search for her, I feel a cold hand on my shoulder.

“You look pale.”

I look at him, his face full of worry. Genuine or not, I don't know. I don't understand what just happened, and how he managed to win. But what did he win? Me, I guess. I'm an item to these two. Feels like it at least.

People aren't items. He just set you back on the right path.

Right, the right path. Focusing on repaying my debt.

“Am I? I'm fine.”

“I'll drive you home,” he smiles, taking my hand and pulling me towards his car.

“I can drive, I'm fine.”

A lie. I know I can't drive right now. My legs feel weak, and my mind is fuzzy. I wanna drive after Vanessa, but there's no energy left in my body. My head is throbbing from being thrown around, and James' grip is iron. I could never pull myself away. All I can do is fidget with my pendent, not daring to meet his eyes.

“Just come with me.”

“No, I wanna go after her.”

His smile dissolves. The green lights are gone, but the eyes aren't. Their judging gazes pierce into my thoughts. I don't even know if they're mine anymore.

But he doesn't say anything else. He grabs my wrist, practically shoving me into the back of his car. He slams the door when he sees I'm inside. I just lay on the seats, staring at the green ceiling. Rubbing my thumb over the jagged edges of my blue pendant, I try to calm my mind. But being Blue is what got me here.

I don't even hear the engine start. All I see, all I hear, all I feel, are those green lights. They consume the blue of my pendant, turning it green. Their eyes stare down, their beams touch me, their voices whisper in my head.

It's going to be fine, as long as you come back and do it all again tomorrow.

In the Roots

Alyiah Sinkler

The sound of a lighter being pressed poked through the silence of the room. The bright orange flame crackled as it transferred from the lighter to the giant white and red candles. The additional light illuminated the desk-now turned into a mini altar, filled with scattered sigils, a bay leaf with writing on it, and a Papa Legba figurine, Lwa of the crossroads and guardian of the barrier between the realms of human and spirit. Hazel-brown eyes stared into the flame, watching it dance about like a spirit. It was like being in a trance. But Sirena had work to do, and she didn't have much time until her mom got home. She softly placed the cardstock square down onto the table, before taking on a determined demeanor.

"Papa Legba, hear my prayer and lend me your ears," Sirena quietly but firmly commanded.

She allowed a moment of silence, reaching for one of the laminated sigils. Eyeing it, she could only hope and pray that this worked.

Hm...if I play some music, maybe that'll help.

As she pressed play on the audio, something stirred within her; the soft melody embraced her heart and her body felt lighter than air. Now ready, she closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

"Papa Legba, bring me a great year. Bring me happiness, love, and prosperity."

She reached over and grabbed the bay leaf. Her intentions were written on it, and she took the red candle and set the paper on fire, the soft music filling her head. She watched the flames devour the paper, admiring the beautiful orangish red. She moved her eyes upwards.

"Papa Legba, please close the gate between our realms," she gave her final instruction, "thank you."

She rested her eyes for a moment, letting the music carry her spirits. A feeling of absolute joy filled her...is this what true power felt like?

I'll find love. I'll find happiness. My mom will get money-

A knock on her room door jolted her out of her thoughts.

"Sirena, can I come in?" her mom's voice

Shit, shit, shit!

As quietly as possible, she blew her candles out and turned towards her door.

"I'm changing, give me a minute!" she called out, quickly cleaning everything as fast and as well as she could.

She hurried over to her bed and reached under to grab her...craft supplies safe, and quickly threw the sigils, figurines, crystals, and mini lighter in the box. Putting the lock back on it, she pushed it deep underneath her bed, before opening the door.

"You need something?" Sirena asked.

Her mother pulled her face into a frown. “What are you doing?”

“Just listening to music,” she half-lied.

Her mother seemed to take the bait and didn’t push it any further.

“What was I gonna say...Oh! Do you wanna watch a movie?” her mother questioned.

“No, I’m just gonna stay in my room,” Sirena answered.

Her mother just pulled her face into a look. “Pero you’re always in your room; what do you even do in here-“

“I just relax, okay?” Sirena immediately cut her off, “I just sit here, draw, listen to music...meditate, whatever.”

Not having anything else to say, her mother turned to leave. She stopped once more, and Sirena almost thought she was going to ask about the missing lighter.

“Don’t forget you have food downstairs” were her final words, before leaving Sirena to herself.

Giving her an “okay”, she shut the door and flopped onto her bed. The music that had remained on play filled the room again, and she couldn’t fight off her dopey grin.

This is going to work. They’ve been treating me so well lately, and I know they won’t let me down.

That night, Sirena hardly slept a wink. Had her phone been living, it probably would’ve cursed her out for invading its personal space. She needed to know if it worked, if she was wasting her time, if her deities were done with her-

Ding!

She nearly fell off the bed with how quick she rolled over. She grabbed her phone and was met with a message from her best friend.

Yaz: Hey SiSi, my mom got word from the hospital. My aunt’s starting to improve! Whatever u did with her hair that day, it fucking worked! Thank u so much, ur the greatest bestie ever! <333

A huge grin spread across Sirena’s face. Since third grade, Yasmin’s been her best friend, and even after telling her what she wanted to get into, she was still supportive, despite the practice not being in her culture.

“Sirena!”

Her mother’s voice made her roll out of bed.

“Yeah?” she called back.

“It’s eleven in the morning, aren’t you gonna come down and eat something?” she called out.

“Yeah, one sec!” Sirena called back, heading to the bathroom.

While she brushed her teeth, all she could do was think about last night.

I really hope this works. Maybe if this does, I can tell my mom, and she'll finally accept me and what I practice.

She went on to swished some mouthwash in her mouth before moving on to washing her face. She closed her eye and massaged the sugar scrub onto her skin. The grainy texture scraped off the dead skin on her face, and she immediately felt the tingling sensation. She rinsed the scrub off her face and cracked her eyes open-

She nearly jolted out of her skin. Rubbing her eyes, she opened them fully, but what she saw in the mirror was no longer there...

Did I just...no, I'm just tired. I need to eat something.

Sirena made her way downstairs, where she pulled a breakfast sandwich from the freezer and started up the coffee maker.

"Do you wanna watch something on TV?" she heard her mother ask.

She probably didn't check her account yet.

"Nope," Sirena answered, adding creamer into her coffee.

Her mother didn't take too kindly to that. "You know, most fourteen-year-olds have jobs; you're always on the phone, so why don't you look for one?"

Sirena didn't know what the hell her problem was, but she wasn't going to deal with her today. Grabbing her food, she went back upstairs and shut the door. Before she devoured her food, she stared at where her altar once was.

Come on you guys, you've always been there.

Sirena knew she had to put trust in her spiritual guardians, but she couldn't help it. What if it didn't work? What if she wasted her time?

As she stared at her phone, her mom's little remark barged into her head again. She was literally a freshman; she didn't need a job *right this moment*. Though...she could always use her new skill to make some extra cash...

A thought formulating in her head, she grinned and reached into her nightstand drawer, pulling out a lime green notebook. She promised to never do baneful magick unless it was necessary, so those were definitely out of the picture. Her healing spell...well, she had only done one, but it *had* worked...

She listed that as a service, along with gris-gris bags, spell jars, and readings. She wrote down prosperity spells, though she'd have to wait for the results before that was finalized. She added on love spells, though she'd have to work a bit more on that.

Should I add voodoo dolls?

Now that was something to really ponder on. While most people's idea of the dolls were evil, they could also possibly be used for healing...much like most of what she had done so far...

She placed a question mark by that suggestion and stared at what she had so far.

"Well...it's a start," she finally said to herself.

A knock on the door startled her, and she hid the journal under her pillow.

“Come in!” she called out.

Her mother barged in, and Sirena prepared for the worst.

“I just got a deposit of \$1000!” she exclaimed.

Grinning, Sirena pretended to be shocked. “Really? What for?”

“Remember that art contest? I got second place!” her mother cheered, “Thank God!”

Sirena didn’t say anything, just slightly nodded.

Her mother took notice of that and frowned. “What?”

Now it was Sirena’s turn to frown. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Exactly, you got quiet when I said that,” her mother pressed on, “you do believe in God, right?”

Sirena had no choice but to shelter her true feelings.

“Yup,” she lied, wanting her mother to leave right then and there.

Taking the hint, her mom walked out of the room, not bothering to say anything else. Sirena waited until her fading footsteps reached the bottom, before whipping out her notebook once more.

Okay, yes to the prosperity spells.

A few weeks had gone by and so far...she made quite a bit of money. People mostly went for the readings and the spell jars, but others took some interest in the prosperity and love spells. This Friday, instead of walking straight home from school, she stopped by a convenient store to purchase some hard candies. Slapping her debit card onto the screen, she thanked the man and made her way to a crossroad near her house. She just stared around, making sure there was no one else coming by. Taking the candies out of her bag, she mentally chuckled to herself.

I look ridiculous.

She stared at the pieces in her hand, before staring at the crossroad.

“Papa Legba, thank you for blessing me with an amazing gift,” she softly voiced, “please accept my offering and continue to guide me throughout my life.”

She scattered the candies around the stop sign, a small smile on her face as she did so.

“I’ll return soon,” she whispered, now making her way home.

Once she arrived, she went inside and slipped her shoes off.

“Hey!” she called out, starting to head up the stairs.

Her mother appeared before her in what seemed like milliseconds.

“Hi, mami,” she greeted her, “your dad called.”

Sirena stopped in her tracks. She turned in surprise but wasn’t given the chance to question it.

“He asked if you wanted to go to church with him this weekend.”

Sirena froze. Of all places, why church? He knew he missed her, and she him, but seriously?

“Well?” her mother poked into her head.

Sirena fought with herself a bit more, before settling with an “I don’t know”.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? It’s church,” her mother asked.

“I just...I don’t really go to church anymore,” Sirena half-lied, “I feel weird going.”

The fair-skinned woman didn’t like that response.

“Why would you feel weird going?” she pressed further, “don’t you believe in God?”

“You can believe in a god and not go to church,” Sirena pointed out, “the two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“In a god? There’s only one god,” her mom corrected her.

Sirena waved her hand. “Yeah, okay, you know what I mean.”

“Well, let him know that you don’t want to go,” her mom finally concluded.

As she walked away, something occurred to Sirena: she was trying to be open to all religions, but right now, that wasn’t what she was demonstrating.

“Wait!”

Her mother reappeared in front of her, with a look asking her what she wanted.

“I...I changed my mind...I’ll go,” she forced out with a teensy smile.

A grin spread across the woman’s face as she stared at her daughter.

“Okay, well go pick out an outfit—”

“I’m not wearing a dress,” Sirena cut her mom off, “I’ll wear a cute sweater, and if you have dress pants I can borrow then I’ll wear those.”

Her mother opened her mouth to say something but decided to drop it.

“I’m just glad you’re going back to church,” her mother said with a smile.

As her mother walked away, Sirena’s heart split into two. Her mother rarely gave her that warm smile, but this wasn’t what she wanted...

Maybe it won’t be so bad, Sirena thought, I was a kid kid the last time I went. Maybe things will be different.

I knew it. I knew this was a mistake.

Sirena was silent during the ride back. She just...she couldn’t believe she hadn’t trusted her initial gut. Why, *why* did she have to be so desperate to please her mother?

“Are you okay?” her father’s deep voice brought her back to reality.

Sirena turned to her dad. “Yeah, just tired.”

The darkskin man rose an eyebrow. “‘Just tired’, huh?”

Sirena sighed. Her dad was always more reasonable than her mom...

“Dad...this is a one-time thing,” she finally admitted, “I don’t want to go back to church.”

There was silence for a moment, and Sirena feared she just severed the bond with her dad.

“I figured.”

Sirena just blinked at his words. How did he-

“You don’t think I noticed? I had a feeling Christianity wasn’t really your thing. And you know what? That’s fine; I’ve got friends that are atheist.”

The young girl squirmed a bit. “Well...I’m not exactly atheist...”

“Oh okay, so what do you wanna practice?” her father asked.

“Well...Hoodoo and Voodoo, more...Afrocentric practices,” she answered.

Her dad seemed intrigued. “Hm, okay. Well, I know a thing or two about that. Your aunties do Hoodoo; I’m not too sure about Voodoo.”

Sirena’s eyes widened as a grin spread across her face.

Not me striking gold after this horrible day.

“Do they have Facebook or anything? I’d love to learn from them,” Sirena practically pleaded.

Her father chuckled. “They were there at the church; they asked about you, but you walked out before they could find you.”

Sirena’s mind went blank at that information.

“Wait...they’re Christian...but practice Hoodoo...huh?” Sirena wondered.

Her father nodded. “Yeah, Hoodoo’s a spiritual practice about ancestral honor. You can be any religion and incorporate Hoodoo within your practice.”

That was news. Sirena took a moment to process that. Not that she’d go back to Christianity, but it still felt good to hear that...

“So...you’re okay with me practicing that, even will all the negative things I’m sure you’ve heard about the two?” Sirena hesitantly asked.

Now in front of her house, he put the car in park before facing his baby girl.

“Listen Sirena, no religion is inherently good or evil; it’s what you use that religion for. As long as you are respectful, you are free to practice whatever you want,” he answered.

Sirena’s heart warmed. “Thanks, Dad.”

While she gathered her mini backpack, her dad made one last remark.

“Just don’t make a voodoo doll of me,” he teased.

Grinning, Sirena rolled her eyes. “You’re baldheaded, you’ll be fine.”

The two shared a quick laugh and Sirena opened the car door.

“Bye, love you,” she voiced.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know,” her dad teased.

Laughing, she walked up the porch and grabbed her keys. Unlocking the door, she was met with the sound of the TV.

“Hi, mami!” her mother greeted her, “how was church?”

She smiled as she thought back to her conversation with her dad, but it faltered as she thought of the actual sermon.

“It was okay,” she settled for that word.

Her mom raised her eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“The pastor was just saying some stuff that I didn’t really like,” she admitted.

“Okay...like what?” the fair-skinned woman pressed further.

“Well, there was this one girl who, I guess had some tattoo, and the pastor called her out in front of everyone and made her feel uncomfortable,” Sirena explained, “and the stuff he was saying about women, how they shouldn’t dress showing skin and how it’s impure. And I really don’t wanna repeat what he said about queer people...”

The fair-skinned woman just looked at her daughter. Sirena tried to read her face, but she failed yet again.

“Okay well, that’s what the bible says. I’m not sure what to tell you.”

Her face scrunched at her mother’s words.

“Mom, what he said was ignorant,” she tried to explain, “there’s nothing wrong with being Christian but sheesh, you can’t just say things like that and expect people to be okay with it.”

“Well, the Bible is God’s word, so that’s that,” the woman voiced.

Sirena scoffed, walking towards the kitchen.

“Figures you’d feel that way” was all Sirena said.

Her mother was right on her heels.

“What does that mean?” she demanded, “I believe in God, of course I’m going to feel that way.”

“Well, has it occurred to you that your beliefs are hateful? What kinda religion teaches you to hate people? I bet if the bible said interracial relationships were a sin, you probably would’ve aborted me,” Sirena sharply voiced.

“Umm no, I wouldn’t have,” her mother argued, “abortions are against the bible, and I don’t know why people don’t take responsibility for when they decide to have sex.”

“There you go again, you just don’t get it,” Sirena commented, throwing up her hands.

“Well you need to respect my beliefs-“

“And you need to stop shoving your beliefs down my throat!” Sirena finally snapped.

The silence that followed made Sirena's stomach churn. Why did she say that? Why did she have to let her mother get under her skin? Great, now she'd never hear the end of it.

"What do you mean by that?" the pale woman demanded, "I'm not shoving anything down your throat. We *should* go to church, and I don't know why you stopped going!"

"Because I want nothing more to do with that, okay?" Sirena answered, begging for the conversation to be over.

Unfortunately, she only added fuel to her fire.

"What do you mean by that!" her mother yelled, before narrowing her eyes, "what, are you an atheist now?"

Despite her irritation, she found amusement at the accusation.

"Who said anything about atheism?" she asked, letting out small chuckles.

The older woman wasn't finding the amusement. "That's what you're trying to say, you don't believe in God anymore!"

Sirena wanted to tell the truth. She wished she had a mother that could understand it was okay to have differing beliefs. She wished she had a mother that was both a parent and a best friend. She wished that she could share her beliefs with her mother. But...there were things that not even the Lwa could grant.

"I'm not atheist, I just...don't wanna go back to church," she finally answered, "especially not after today."

The woman still wasn't satisfied but didn't give a verbal response. Rolling her eyes, she walked back into the living room and Sirena stormed upstairs. She didn't bother to change out of her clothes before throwing herself onto her bed, grabbing her Papa Legba necklace from her pillowcase and clutching the purely gold pendant.

The Dance

Rachel Wakefield

Esmeralda looked in the mirror at her unfamiliar reflection. She didn't look bad, but she just wasn't herself. The make-up girl who had given her employee number when Esmeralda had asked her what her name was, was quite pleasant throughout their interaction, and she wished for her to come back as the dressing maids came in and stuffed her into different dresses that cut off the airflow to her lungs and pushed her breasts up to her chin.

Finally, they settled on a silk emerald dress.

"For your name's sake," The older woman crooned in her ear almost like her mother used to, but still holding an air of detached coolness.

As the women began to file out of her room, the youngest stumbled and knocked over the crystal vase full of lavender and roses. The vase shattered on the floor, shards, water and flowers strewn about like a massacre. Her heart ached seeing the only remnants of home ripped apart by the sharp edges of the glass. She screamed as the women reached to pick up the mess.

"How could you! How could you!"

The youngest girl's hands began to bleed as she picked at the crystal shards faster to try and appease Esmeralda. In the midst of her fit, John walked in with a pair of white gloves. He stopped before he extended them out to her

"What happened?" he asked.

She looked at the cowering women on the floor, and with a snap told him "They broke my flowers!"

The women bowed their heads and begged for forgiveness.

"We're so sorry!" The oldest woman cried.

"It's no matter, just clean up the mess before we're back." He waved them off and held his hand out to Esmeralda, she looked back at the women scurrying around the floor like rats.

"Come on Esmeralda."

His tone stern but nonchalant, she turned her back to the unknown girl with bloody hands and followed behind him.

They entered the space station corridor, and she shuddered at the cold emptiness of the metallic walls that seemed to close in on her. Her breath hitched in her throat, she hadn't left her suit in days, she assumed once she was out, she'd feel better but the coolness of the walkway only left her feeling panicked. John noticed her trembling and reached his hand out for her to hold.

He didn't say much on the long walk to the event, but to just relax and don't think too much about anything. They stopped at a set of ornate doors completely out of place in the stiff bland hallways, he slipped her gloves on and nodded to the suited men guarding the doors. They opened to a room so extravagant she felt power flowing into her as if it were being pumped into

the air supply. Her white gloves her ticket, allowing her access to all the abundance. She made her way to table full of cakes and alcohol,

“Go ahead, have some!” John nudged her toward a platter of little white frosted cupcakes.

She picked one up and immediately the frosting produced a stain, it wasn't so noticeable though unless someone was so inclined to look close enough. As she bit into it, she let out a moan of pleasure and without thought squished the cupcake, the red inside covered her fingers, leaving a much more noticeable stain. She blushed embarrassed but as she looked around, she saw everyone's gloves were stained.

“Well, hello there!”

John and Esmeralda turned to see the senator beaming at her, she felt a wave of nausea fall over her at the sight of him.

“Captain, I see you've brought our special guest this evening after all.” The Senator put his hand on John's shoulder and smiled encouragingly.

“Yes, it wasn't easy. She has her reservations about participating in our society as you know.”

“Ah, yes, I do know. I hope that tonight you see we're not so bad here.” He turned to her as he if she only just arrived.

“Hello senator, how are you this evening?”

He let out an uproarious burst of laughter, “I'm well child, what do you think of our event this evening?”

She decided to ignore the childish comment this time, to maintain the jovial attitude of the evening, even though the word slithering under her skin like a snake.

“It's truly a gorgeous evening, a rare event.”

“Well, maybe in comparison to your mud hut parties, but I'm sure those are much wilder.” He winked at her a lecherous grin spread across his face.

“They are wild fun!” John chimed in.

“Wild fun isn't much in the way of elegance,” Esmeralda said glancing around at the gilded crown molding and the crystals dripping from the ceiling. The rest of the station couldn't hold a candle to this room.

“Maybe not, but to enjoy a night of savagery with only beautiful women is a dream to some of us repressed old men. Tell me are the women of Earth all as beautiful as yourself, or are you just as rare as your namesake?”

“Maybe the parties are savage but not the fun kind,” Esmeralda retorted, although without thinking her words took on a different meaning to the men, and they burst out laughing. She regretted her thoughtlessness and the cruelty it meant to her people, her throat became thick, and she began to sweat although she felt increasingly colder.

“And what of their beauty darling? John tells me you've survived from cloning; how does that effect the look of the clan?”

“I’m telling you, they’re all beauties from what I saw on my scouting mission. Couldn’t believe it, after all these years it was like being dropped into an island of Amazons.” John roared

“With that gene splicing technology, we could do so much for our community. We have so much to offer each other,” the Senator purred.

“From my perspective, my people have so much to offer you Senator, but we’re not so sure what you are offering us?”

He reached a hand to her shoulder. “Genetic variation of course! You can’t expect to go on as you have forever. We all get what we need.”

“And what of the Earth's needs? We have only survived and thrived because of the changes we made to our way of living after your ancestors left. We will not go back to the old ways, to your ways. And we won't allow you to come and do as you please.”

“Women are such silly creatures!” the senator chortled, looking only at John who smirked and sipped his champagne at this.

“Enjoy your evening.” He waved as he walked off.

Esmeralda went to call after him, but her throat was closed, and it stopped her words. She would have to live another day here to fight.

Chrysanthemum Sunshine

Kate Roberts

That October, dawns were a dusty clover purple
You would stroll through streets filled with evaporating mist
watching lights in houses blink to life, one by one
you traced out the silver trails of falling stars
and repeated your childhood wish for strength

Your mornings were sand-pail yellow
You'd drive alone to the lakeshore
and race along the gravel path to meet your family at the water's edge
waving to the startled seagulls that wheeled away
your mother would wander off here
but you'd follow her footprints
and always bring her home again

Afternoons you wore a crown of gold-red leaves
the crisp air tasted like your ambition
and you used to do your homework
or bead day-of-the-week bracelets
sitting beside a woman who could not remember your sister's name
you promised yourself soon you'd show her your diploma
and she'd be so proud of you

That October
Mum was going to get better.
It was all going to be okay.

One evening, that October
You drove your brother to boy scouts
and he told you your parents lied
Mum was lucky to have made it past May.
All he wanted was for her to live a few months more
to see him turn sixteen
You promised him it'd be okay

But it is November now,
and your voice is gone.
Your hands have no uses.
You stare at them for hours;
uncertain what to do with them.
Uncertain how to fill the time.

Slippery When Wet

Teresa Ingram

The camera's flash hit our eyes like lightning, and we both blinked multiple times. It was July 1991, and we were on 42nd Street. Photographers hung their various backdrops and beckoned couples and friend groups to seal their memories with a photo. I still have that Polaroid, showing us both smiling shyly into the camera, faces and bodies leaning toward each other, but not touching. It was our first date, and we had gone for dinner at the now-shuttered Tad's Steakhouse. Cheap date, but the company and conversation were good. After the photo, Derick took my hand, and we walked around Times Square beneath all the lights and among all the faces. He had taken me by the waist and moved me to his left side so that he was walking closer to the traffic than me. He would be my savior if a car came barreling toward us. "Let it hit me first before it ever touches you," he'd said. His chivalry was attractive to me. I wish I knew it was a quality he could take off and put on at will, like a mask. Six years later and he had taken it off to be sure.

I held the cordless phone up as high as I could, trying to keep him from hanging it up or snatching it out of my hand. I could hear the woman, the other woman, yelling "hello" on the other end of the line. I was 5'11, but at 6 foot 5 inches tall, Derick was easily able to grab my hand and squeeze it hard enough to force my fingers to press the End Call button. But we still struggled for control of the phone. Forgetting the Mop & Glo he had just used to put a glistening shine on the old hardwood floors, he pushed me. That was more than thirty years ago, but a part of me still held out hope that he pushed me much harder than he meant to. I flew into the framework of the French door, hitting my head squarely on my left browbone in the process. I screamed at him from the floor, "Ow! Look what you did!" Crying angry, hot tears, I gathered myself and stood up slowly, dropping the coveted phone as I did. I stomped past him and went into the bedroom, throwing myself onto the bed. The bed he had found and purchased – with my money, of course. My tears would not stop. I could not believe that he had handled me so roughly, all to stop me from talking to that woman. He begged my forgiveness as he knelt at the foot of the bed. "I love you, baby," he cooed at me like he was trying to win over a small child. "I am so sorry. It will never happen again. I promise." I would hear those very words too many times to count over the years.

I met him on a hot summer evening in 1991 while hanging out with friends. I was only 21, but I thought I knew everything. I would come to find out that I knew extraordinarily little, especially about relationships and him. He was 26 and self-assured, if even a bit cocky. "I'm Derick," he said, as he stuck out his hand to shake mine. He was sweet-natured, generous, loving, and lovable. He was a hugger, and since touch was my love language, I could not resist falling right into step with him. How could nearly 30 years go by so quickly and yet slip by so slowly like one grain of sand at a time in a broken hourglass? How could I lose myself so completely in this one man? This man who would continue to make a mockery of our relationship. Of me.

Unbeknownst to me, I awoke with my left eye blackened like I had been in a prize fight at Madison Square Garden. Having showered and dressed for work in the curtained silhouettes of the unlit apartment so as not to awaken him, I had slipped out unseen into the hazy sunshine of the Harlem morning. I rode my usual M10 bus to work at my midtown law firm, consumed by

the New York Daily News and unaware of the dark, angry purple and black encircling my left eye. I typed the morning away at my computer, focused on my morning assignments and only offering a glancing hello to fellow secretary, Barb. When hunger struck, I took a needed break from the tedious document to properly greet my friend. "Teresa!" Barb shrieked my name as she finally got a full look at me. "Oh my God! What the hell happened to your eye!" At my questioning look, Barb handed me a mirror from her desk drawer. Seeing my eye surrounded by darkness infuriated me all over again. But I could not possibly tell Barb the truth. No matter how angry I was at him, I just did not want anyone else to harbor bad feelings about the man I assured myself I loved. Quickly, I made up a lie. The kitchen cabinet, the one that would never stay completely closed. I stood up without looking and smack! Being that I had showered and dressed in the dark so I would not wake Derick, I had not even seen my eye. Barb seemed suspicious, eyeing me from head to toe. We were not just coworkers, after all; we were friends. Barb began to question me, "did you pass out, does your eye hurt? can you see?" "Everything is fine," I said. "I am just always so clumsy. If I'm not spilling something, I'm falling or bumping my head," I said with a shrug. Barb finally stopped looking at me so strangely. Although I hated lying to my friend, I was glad Barb seemed to believe me. Plus, she volunteered to bring lunch back to my desk so no one else would see that I had a black eye.

I was supposed to meet Derick after work to go to Mommy's house. I had run out of money for the month, and Mommy was always there to save me, bless her. But I could never go there, with or without him, with a black eye. She would call my father, he would call my brothers and cousins in Newark, and there would no doubt be violence at the end of all that calling. What were we going to do? I worried for the rest of the day until he met me on Park Avenue for the walk to the train station. He produced the solution as we rode the #4 train to the Bronx.

We would stop at Rite Aid on 170th Street, and I could pick out the right makeup to cover my eye. Me. A grown woman who had never worn more than lip gloss at that time. I was supposed to figure out how to cover up this evidence of his trifling behavior. But he picked out the color, and after riding the two additional stops to 176th Street where Mommy lived, I stood dutifully on the platform with my eyes shut, head tilted to the sky, while Derick applied makeup to the black eye he caused. He had known just what to do to fix this problem. He had fixed the same problem for his mother before she was due at the public assistance office to secure their benefits. His stepfather had been brutal to them both, and he fell right into that same pattern. Thankfully, Mommy did not notice a thing and we left just as quickly as we had arrived. Derick charmed her as usual, and we were back on the #4 train in minutes, heading home to Harlem.

Once we made it home, I went straight to the computer. Listening to all the bells and whistles as my PC logged on to AOL, I was anxious to see just how long this black eye would last. How long would I have to play Cover Girl makeup model. Weeks? I was hoping the AOL search page would say days, not weeks! I sighed a disgusted sigh, shook my head and shut down the PC. Thankfully, I did not have any of the symptoms listed that would require me to visit an eye doctor to lie yet again. But I was angry all over again, my mouth forming into a scowl and my eyes darkening. Derick was in the kitchen putting away the groceries we picked up on our way in. The apartment began to smell like hamburger. I went into the bathroom to shower, dressed in flannel pajamas and went to bed. "Your burger is ready," he said excitedly. I pretended to be asleep. My tightly closed lids silently screaming "do not touch me and do not talk to me." He did anyway, silently as well. He took hold of my left foot and gently squeezed,

saying “I’m sorry” while rubbing my feet. He knew what I liked. My anger melted, but I refused to acknowledge him.

If I am being completely honest with myself, anger was not my true emotion. I knew that anger was what he would respond to, and I did not yet have the grown woman tools in my toolbox to show him my real feelings: hurt, embarrassment, anguish. Bitter anguish that we were back here again. Back then I would have called it sadness, but it was more than that. He had never physically hurt me before, but he knew that flannel meant I was not to be touched or spoken to because we had been down the “other woman” road before. Not just any woman, either. That woman. He had been known to bounce back and forth between us. My young mind made me blame her. Soon I would discover things about myself and about him that would teach me why that was not true.

The rest of the week went by without fanfare. He continued to try to appease me with dinners, and I broke out all the flannel I owned. By the weekend, I was all out of long-sleeved flannel, and I decided we may as well get this much needed talk out of the way. I awakened him with his favorite over easy eggs, bacon, toast and black coffee from the corner bodega. However, this talk went nothing like I expected it to go. I was looking for a mushy apology, maybe even a tear or two on his behalf. Instead, he said “It was not my fault ... not really. Blame the Mop & Glo.” What the ...? I could not believe what I had just heard. Had he really said, “Blame the Mop & Glo,” as if he did not push me hard enough to send me crashing into the doorframe? I lost my appetite immediately. My bacon, egg and cheese sandwich would turn cold and soggy on the kitchen table. It was Saturday, laundry day. I made sure he took all my flannel with him because what would follow would be nights spent in loneliness, even with him next to me in my bed. I sat on the sofa, staring bleakly at the life playing out before my eyes.

He did not know yet that I had heard his entire conversation with that woman. But he would soon find out because I could hold on to information like a steel vault, springing it at the most opportune time. Opportune for me. Looking back on it, I wish I knew then all that I know now. I would have recognized the losses I would suffer in trying to love a man who could not love me back, and just how brightly the red flags in this relationship shone. But here I was, back on the cordless phone. Dialing her number. That other woman’s number. After speaking with her and learning the lies he told her about me were not so different from the lies he told me about her, I placed his long, army green duffel bag in the living room. I had packed his things through teary eyes and a broken heart. Broken because he was lying to me. Again. Strangely, I found myself being grateful for that black eye because all my resolve was built in the weeks it took for my eye to heal. I could finally say to him “you have to leave” and mean it. I would be free of him and all this drama. Or so I thought. I would need a lot more resolve than what I had built up in the space of a couple of weeks. I did not know that he had been building his own reserves. Reserves of nerve and gall. Have you ever heard of squatter’s rights? Neither had I. He called the police when he saw his duffel bag in the living room. That was the galling part. I hadn’t called the police when he facilitated my black eye. But here they were. Two uniformed officers informed me that I could not eject him from my apartment because, by law, he had been there for more than 30 days. I did not have the right to make him homeless. I had to endure his presence for an additional month before I was able to get a housing judge to order his eviction. I learned that it’s not just floors that are slippery when wet, relationships are, too. When relationships are wet with your tears, they can be slippery and hazardous, too.

Making that phone call had done more to solidify my resolve than any interaction with him could have. Her name was Carine. I knew of her, and she knew of me. Neither of us could seem to let him go. I don't know why. I didn't care to know. All I needed to know was whether he was still involved with her. Her confirmation that he was, along with specific dates and events, was what gave me the power in myself to pack his duffel bag. As for why I hadn't released him until now, I wanted to "win" him because I thought my love was better than hers. Silly, stupid and young. Those would perfectly describe me during those years.

Derick Barnes knew just how to manipulate my desire for him and my childish need to win him over his other woman. I would come to learn that Derick was well-versed in the art of narcissistic behaviors. But when we met, I thought of him as nothing but charming, attentive and sweet. He catered to me, planning dates and giving me little thoughtful gifts. He would come to my office for lunch, show up with breakfast and flowers, and shower me with attention. My girlfriends confessed their jealousy that their boyfriends paled in comparison. Derick was raised by his single mother until he was about 8 years old when she met the father of his little brother. This was life-altering for him because his mother became so wrapped up in this new romance that she began to put this man before her son. She seemingly ignored the fact that he was verbally and physically abusive toward Derick until he began to treat her in the same manner. By then, it was too late by her estimation. Love would not let her leave him. Derick endured his abusive nature for 9 years until finally his mother agreed with this man that 17-year-old Derick should leave the home if he could not have a good relationship with him. One last physical altercation left Derick bruised, bloodied and sleeping on his grandmother's sofa. He arrived there reluctantly, with a secret that he had been carrying for years. A damaging secret that affected him daily.

However, I could no longer allow his pain to keep me in the cycle we had gotten ourselves into. I started out in what I thought was a couple, young and full of love and desire. I ended this chapter not so young, but thankfully still open to love and desire. Just not with Derick. I grew and I changed . . . and I stopped using Mop & Glo. Plain hot water and wood soap for me. Oh, by the way, I'm Teresa.

The Cries

Sean Nash

The darkness ate up any indication of the light behind her, as if it were a feast. A breath that wasn't hers echoed from the other side of the door. She peered through the small hole in the door. A creature shambled through the hallway towards the door from a distance. It was stiff. Stumbling. She knew if it came through the door it would look through her, like she didn't exist, focusing solely on the light behind her. It made her spine chill. She pushed herself to reach out. The effort overwhelming. She summoned up her voice.

The corridor seemed to stretch outward endlessly into the dark. He could tell he was in a hallway, feeling the walls on either side and the occasional doorknob. None of them budged. There was no respite from the darkness. He caught his breath. Sweat dripping down his forehead. Clutching palms around nothing but air, knuckles white. His steps felt heavy. His ears perked up at a small distant noise.

"Hello?" She paused. It stopped moving. It seemed to now gaze through the door and towards her, like her words were just another sound in the darkness, "Who are you?" Still no response. Her voice rose. "Are you ok?". Through the small hole in the door she saw the creature still walked on but its figure no longer shambled. It stepped with purpose. "Are you ok? Can you hear my voice?". The creature seemed to take suddenly stopping at her voice. Perhaps it could understand her? It was rare that the creatures could comprehend her words. Could someone finally understand her? It stepped forward, towards the door, nodding along to her questions. It knew where she was. It sounded like it was getting faster.

A noise came from behind one of the doors in the endless hallway. A cry echoing from somewhere ahead. His head whipped to meet its source, there was nothing to be seen other than the same endless night. Wait. The cries grew louder. A voice from under the door was calling him. A tiny pin prick of light in the darkness. He stepped forward. Toward the light, toward the cries. He tried to remember what mattered besides the dark. To resolve to return to what was normal as he had so many times before. Back in the dark. The only way forward was towards those cries. It almost seemed as if the light was speaking to him. An offer of salvation?

It seemed to be laughing. It was maniacal almost. Maybe the creature found her pleas for attention amusing; similar to a prey calling out to its predator. She could see it now. It was similar to her. Maybe it would acknowledge her. The warmth on her back grew more intense as she felt herself tempted to meet it out further from the light, on the other side of the door. To meet the creature. Speak to it. Try to understand it. She wondered what the dark was like. Maybe it was like a new world? The light was her world. Who was she to try and leave it? The *things* outside the light aren't like hers. Nevertheless, it found itself there, right at her door.

Steps seemed to come easier, his goal now lay ahead. The light was overwhelming as it began to consume the darkness within his vision, the strange voice becoming ever more distinct in the endless darkness from which he had come from. The headache cleared. The weeping voice. He still couldn't understand. There was no more true darkness lining the walls. He gazed at his own hands, wiry and aged. He had never seen his body before. Step after step, accelerating forward. And then he stopped again. There was something new. Underfoot, the wood creaked, a chorus escaping the old nails holding the floorboards together.

Her voice wasn't reaching the creature. No matter how hard she tried it didn't respond. It clawed towards her door. She was tempted to open the door and welcome it. She could feel the impacts of the creature wailing its feet against the floor from the edge of darkness. She could free it. Welcome it into the light and into her world. It still scared her, this thing from the unknown. Its cries quickly overwhelmed her fear with pity.

Almost in a near sprint, he rushed down the hallway, he was getting closer. Rushing onward into this new world, as the light only grew, he felt a smile creep across his face. The feeling of freedom. A new world. Air that didn't taste like rot. He stopped. He arrived at a single door, light escaping from a small hole in the middle. Shaking hands turned the handle.

Her breath stopped as the handle rattled.

It was locked. He kicked and mauled at the door, but it wouldn't open. He rushed back and crashed into the door. He collapsed in pain as the door watched over him taunting his attempts.

She conquered her fear.

And the door opened, swinging open. The light was overwhelming, a single silhouette lying against it as his eyes recoiled from the sudden adjustment.

She watched the creature who wasn't a creature anymore. A man. His clothes torn-

He could see that his fingers were covered in soot and ash. He looked up at the figure with his dark brown eyes quickly adjusting to the light.

She stared into the darkness.

He stared into the light.

And a new world opened for both of them.

A Single Spark

Justine Alfano

Wait!” I screamed as I watched your silhouette bleed into the night sky. I ripped my heels off and ran down the staircase. “*Please*,” I murmured with a quivering lip. The sleet bit my eyes as I tried to catch a glimpse of you. But you were nowhere to be found.

Earlier that evening, I sat in Simon’s room for quite some time. Straightening my hair, then curling it again. Hairspray, pins, eyeliner, and lipstick sprawled across the floor while I listened to Fergie on the lowest volume possible.

For much of my late teens, I had honed an ability to shapeshift. My looks, my vocabulary, and even my interests shifted from guy to guy like I was a seasoned actress. Simon was my newest love, older, taller, and toned, with gentle waves that clung to his forehead whenever he played guitar. Butterflies and all that junk fluttered beneath my skin whenever our blue eyes met.

I spent months fantasizing about building a life with Simon after he graduated college, and even more time in the gym counting calories. Dreaming about *how* and *when* he’d ask to make things official. Maybe tonight was that night, I thought as I put on the most daring pair of heels yet. We had bought tickets to see an orchestra, along with friends of his I had never met before.

It was simple. I’d pull out my charm and hopefully land the starring role.

We were the first to arrive. Simon and I waited in front of the Eastman auditorium, at the mouth of its sweeping staircase. The sun was setting quickly, and the cold wind began to wrestle its way underneath my skirt. “The show is starting in ten, where the *hell* are they?” he said impatiently. It wasn’t like Simon to ever be late. Everything about him was orderly, face shaved, strings tuned, alarm set, repeat. I squeezed his hand. He ruffled through his suit pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboros, but he couldn’t find his lighter, “Fuck!”

“Calm down, there’s gotta be someone with a lighter,” I insisted, “Let’s just ask around.”

We watched people pass us left to right. The entire street was one big blur of Christmas lights, stiff petticoats, and black stockings. Until we finally saw you, curled up against the base of a lamppost. Your clothes were tattered, wet, and soiled with dirt. I remember how you smelled when we approached you. A potent combination of body odor and damp smoke.

Bingo.

Simon waved his cigarette about cheerfully, “Hey man, you got a light? I’ll give you a cig if you got a light.”

You patted your pockets with weary hands, mumbling to yourself. Your brows scrunched up with the rest of your face. Your eyes scurried around, jumping from place to place like a flea circus.

“*I do!* Please wait. *Please!*” you said before scuffling down the nearest alleyway—returning just seconds later with a lighter in hand. You were so proud; the corners of your toothless mouth opened wide. Your arms bent and swung in an upward motion, as if you were

about to leap or dance a small jig. I smiled. The way you moved reminded me of a similar motion my grandmother preformed many times during church service.

You thanked and thanked Simon again as he handed you the cigarette. You pulled the lighter up to your mouth with cupped hands. You sparked, then sparked. You flicked and then flicked, but there was no flame. You shook the lighter several times. Still nothing. I winced as I watched you struggle, muttering desperations and tiny prayers.

Suddenly, Simon shook his head in disgust, and with a sharp exhale he snatched the cigarette out of your hand. I watched in horror as you nearly dropped to your knees.

“Please man, *why?*” you cried. I watched the joy drain from the folds of your face. Your limbs deflated, all but one arm remained outstretched with a shaky hand.

“I said I’d give you one, if you had a light!” Simon spat at you and turned his back.

In this moment, I swear your eyes turned to glass, and I watched that glass shatter, blowing me straight into your soul. I felt your loneliness and desperation. I saw your darkness. As your eyes turned towards me, I panicked. I felt lost inside a similar cloud of darkness. I saw myself from above. A pathetic girl trapped inside the shell of a pretend woman. I heard Simon’s voice in the distance. Car horns and the clattering of dress shoes began to swell, pulling me back to the surface.

I reached into my pocket and swiveled my own cigarette between my fingertips. Debating whether I should give it to you. Then I thought about how upset it would make Simon if I were to step on his toes. How angry he would be if I were to disregard his authority and come to your aid. I thought about having to sit next to him the rest of the night. Feeling trapped, I crumbled the cigarette under a clenched fist. Too ashamed to face you, I turned away quickly and walked back over to Simon.

The next thing I remember clearly was holding a pamphlet: *Vivaldi’s Four Seasons*.

I don’t remember meeting any of Simon’s friends though I was sitting next to them. I couldn’t remember exchanging hellos or pleasantries, let alone their faces. I sat up and straightened my shoulders as the lights dimmed. I tried to think back. But, I could only remember the bathroom attendant, the marble floor. The mahogany trim. The bright red carpet. The warmth of the building, and how small I felt under its domed ceiling.

“You’re going to love it!” Simon exclaimed while squeezing my knee, “If you listen close enough, you’ll hear the seasons change.” I looked into his eyes hoping to find a trace of remorse. Something that could tell me that we’d be okay. That we’d last. But there was nothing. Not even butterflies.

The violins sprung into a song. I watched the quivering bows slice across their thin necks. The quick and slow tempos of frivolous spring ballooned within my chest. My breathing only grew heavier by summer’s serenade. I clenched my fists together in prayer as the drums cracked against heaven’s door like thunder.

Dear God, please help that man. Forgive me.

To keep from crying I resorted to the back of the program. I read that Antonio Vivaldi composed many of his concertos for the all-female ensemble of the *Ospedale della Pietà*, a home for abandoned children. He had worked as a Catholic priest and gained some recognition after

composing several operas in Venice, Mantua, and Vienna. After meeting the emperor Charles VI, Vivaldi moved to Vienna hoping for his royal support. However, the emperor died soon after his arrival, and Vivaldi himself died alone in poverty less than a year later.

The lights turned on for intermission. As everyone rose in a roar of applause, I sat frozen. Drowning in a sea of black suits. Tears leapt from my eyes, and I let them fall onto the program.

I wish I could have told you that I did not sit through the rest of the concert. That I waded through the crowd that flooded the lobby like a pile of fallen leaves, Or that I searched for the door with open hands and stepped into the winter world a new woman.

I didn't. I never went out of my way to search for you that night. I may have turned my head once or twice, like a tick, and peered down the alley ways with my peripheral. But only on the way to my car. I tried to keep you in my peripheral – in the rearview mirror. I tried to press you further and further into the dark for quite some time.

But you...you followed me. I saw your face on the bodies of others. On the waitress who seems extensively drained. On the man who needed money for bus fare. On the new father who was struggling to fit balloons into his car outside of Party City.

I thought I had failed, that I would never get the chance to apologize, to right my wrongs. Until I realized you are all around me...As am I, prepared to provide a viable source of light whenever you're in need of a spark.

Things People Do That Piss You Off at Work – The Movie

S.R. Banks

INT. BATHROOM- DAY

Getting ready for work, Stacy stare at herself in the mirror talking aloud to herself.

STACY

Everyday feels like a Monday! I am NOT feeling work today! Look at my hair! Stacy throws the comb down in frustration.

STACY (cont'd)

Why go to the salon if my hair only last TWO FREAKING DAYS Ridiculous! Stacy, storms out of the bathroom, upset. She couldn't get her the way she wanted it. She threw it in a ponytail and continued to get dressed for work.

The phone rings.

STACY

(cont'd) Hello?

NIKKI

Hey girl, you about ready to go? I'll be there in like 5 minutes. Stacy looks at her watch and shakes her head in disgust.

STACY

Dang, Nikki! Work doesn't start for another half-hour and we are 10 minutes away from the job. I'm not even ready!

NIKKI

What time did I tell you I was going to be at your house? You know how I am. It's better to be early than on time.

STACY

(Annoyed, Stacy rolls eyes in the sky) Yea, whatever! I'll be ready. You just make sure you're driving real slow coming here! Stacy presses the end button with as much force as possible.

STACY (cont'd)

Agghhh! She makes me so mad!! I-I wish I had a landline, I would have made her ears bleed slamming the phone in her ear! I need to get my car fixed like yesterday! I hate relying on people!

SUPER-TITLE CARD: CHAPTER 1- FILTHY WORKSTASTIONS AND SMELLY CHAIRS.
INT. - WORK- DAY.

STACY IS INSIDE HER WORK BUILDING. SHE IS WALKING TO HER CUBICLE, AS SHE INTRODUCES HERSELF TO THE WORLD.

STACY

Sorry, I didn't get a chance to introduce myself earlier due to the fact of an unintelligent , cynical person, interrupted my time and took me off my feet. But hey, I'm Stacy! You can probably tell from my intro that some may call me an awkward type of person. I just say, that I'm a no-nonsense, not here for the bull, type of person. I get along with everyone, but some people just rub me the wrong way. That's why, I try and stay to myself. When I'm at work, I just want to do my job and go home. But when you're working in an environment with people that you hate, it makes your job that more challenging.

(MORE)

STACY (cont'd)

Okay, you're thinking that I am overthinking things and I'm not giving people a chance. Yeah, freaking right! Didn't you see how that person was acting earlier? Come on now. I'm not a bad looking chick. I mean my hair could've looked a little better and my outfit is normal, but , wait, you didn't see how she was acting. Well she was stupid and rude. I mean, I had to rush out of the house or this chick would've left me. And I can't afford that. I needed a ride to work. I mean, it was either her or him.

Stacy cuts her eye toward another employee as the camera pans to Tom, eating at the desk and making a mess.

STACY (cont'd)

Look at him. (shakes her head) Tom is making a mess like always. We both share this cubicle and I can almost guarantee that chair smells! Yuck!

Stacy pretends to vomit in her mouth as she walks over to Tom.

TOM

I see you're here early today. Stacy responds with a sarcastic tone and smile.

STACY

Yea, and I see you are extra messy today.

Stacy cuts her eyes to the crumbs and dirty desk. Tom looks down at the desk as well.

TOM

Oh, don't worry. I promise I will clean up. I know you like to "EXTRA" clean.

STACY

Not extra clean, just clean!

Stacy says, as she walks away to her locker.

STACY (cont'd)

I can't stand Tom. He is so nasty and dirty. (MORE)

STACY (cont'd)

He knows that I hate filthy workstations and smelly chairs, but he still stays smelly and still makes a mess. Just thinking about it makes me sick! Listen, if you are working at a shared desk, please keep it clean! No one should have to use a half bottle of Clorox wipes after YOUR shift is

over! Clean up after yourself, please! It's so easy. When you drop something, pick it up. Oh, but not nasty Tom. He like to push the crumbs to the side or wipe them on the floor when the garbage can is right there. He's dirty!

As Stacy is walking back to her cubicle, the camera cuts to Tom sweeping the crumbs right on the floor.

Gut Feeling

Shane Graham

After a couple of years of sharing my guitar covers on Instagram, I had built a relationship with a singer of one of my favorite bands, *Judas Priest*. I texted Rob, I sent him a message saying that I was excited about the new tour, and I will try to make it to a few shows. I checked my phone frequently, waiting for a response. I had met him once before, but I thought it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I jumped at every vibration my phone gave, grabbing it as fast as I could. It wasn't until later that night that he responded.

"Just let me know what shows you wanna come too, I'll get you all set up," he said.

I shot out of my bed and ran to my parents, I was like a kid on Christmas. After a month of planning, my Mom and Dad thought it would be a good idea to go to the Nashville show. My Mom loves country music and culture and my Dad is the one who got me into *Judas Priest* when I was young.

I hopped in the car and fluffed my pillow in preparation for the 12-hour ride. I texted Rob and asked,

"Still all set for tomorrow?"

He responded within 20 minutes saying "Yes Shane, you plus one on the guest list, pick up the tickets at 5:30pm from the guest services booth."

I had told literally everyone at this point. All my friends and family knew what I was doing this weekend. This made me anxious. I filled my head with "What if's". I convinced myself that I wouldn't actually get to talk to him. I wasn't nervous about talking with one of my idols, I was worried about what I would tell everyone when I came back with no pictures and no story.

"You alright back there? You're awfully quiet," my mom asked from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, just tired,"

I could see her eyes peek up in the mirror, but she didn't say anything. I tried to make shapes out of the clouds, or count how many red cars I saw in 10 minutes. As my mind attempted to find new things to think about, I tried to listen to my gut feeling. My gut feeling was that my parents were gonna drive me 12 hours just for a concert, and no conversation with Rob. My gut told me that I was gonna have to tell everyone I didn't talk with Rob, which would make them think there was no way he told me I could go to any shows I wanted. My gut is undefeated, it always wins. We stopped at a rest stop, I peeled myself off the leather seat, revealing the sweat stain behind it. I got some overpriced rest stop McDonald's and walked back to the car. I took a few little bites, it sludged down into my stomach as if my throat was coated in sandpaper. As we got a few hours closer my Dad started to play some Judas Priest over the radio. He knew all of their music, he listened to them growing up just like I did.

Do you know what this song is about Shane?" my Dad asked.

The song was "Heading Out to the Highway" it was one of their earlier songs.

"Well it's probably about touring" I replied as if I knew everything.

"Kinda, but really it's about second chances in life. On a highway there's always a different exit you can get off, or a spot to turn around. Similar to life, there's always a different path to take, or a chance to turn it around."

This stuck with me.

Eventually we arrived and pulled into the hotel, I checked the time on my phone. It was 5 o'clock, just thirty minutes before I needed to get my tickets. Thankfully the hotel was within walking distance from the venue. As we got closer the smell of pot and cigarettes grew stronger, I knew I was near a *Judas Priest* concert. Walking past the line full of middle-aged biker dudes and ladies, all looking at me like I didn't belong there. Fans were tailgating with their coolers sweating with condensation and their speakers blasting. The whole scene uplifted my mood. Walking towards the guest services booth with a big smile I pulled my wallet out of my pocket, ready to show my ID. I walked in with confidence, "Tickets for Shane Graham?"

I slapped my ID in front of the grumpy-looking lady. She slid her glasses down her nose and looked at my face, then my license. She slid the glasses back up and dragged her pen down a list. She reached the bottom and repeated the motion.

"Hmm, no tickets here." My heart sank to my feet. I was the living definition of "shaking in your boots."

"O-ok" I stuttered, "I'll check back in a few minutes."

My voice cracked. I turned around and opened the door, walking back out onto the street. I started texting my friends, telling them that I wouldn't be seeing Rob. I texted Rob, almost positive he wouldn't reply 2 hours before a concert. He quickly responded. "Shit Shane, hold on a few minutes"

My mom could see the excitement on my face as I read the message.

"What happened?" she asked.

"He said to hold on,". My phone vibrated again.

"Come around to the backstage entrance, be there in 5 minutes if you can".

I frantically asked the staff where it was, getting no answer as they thought I was just some crazy fan. He said to come around, so I knew that it had to be on the opposite side. Tripping over beer cans and other litter, I finally found the entrance. Fans were crowded outside. The back doors opened, Rob stood there. Looking at me he gave me the "come here" motion with his hand. People pulled out their phones, I heard one lady yell "Oh my god, it's Rob Halford!" I walked up to him, reaching my hand out for a handshake. He swatted my hand and came in for a bro hug. "So sorry, someone really fucked up, here's your tickets, I'll see you after the show," he said in his British accent.

"Thanks so much man, you're the kindest"

I was trying my hardest not to sound like a fanboy.

After about a two hour show I headed towards the side of the stage and showed my pass to security. I was brought back into a room full of tables surrounded by catering. There were a few people in there but not many. I assumed they worked for the band because of their British accents. A guy walked up to me and shook my hand,

"Hey Shane, I'm Thomas, I'll tell Rob you're here"

Rob's been in the business for over 50 years. Rob, Ozzy Osbourne, and a guy named Lemmy are known as the creators of metal. Rob is known as "The Metal God". I tried not to think about all of this as it would make me more nervous. A few minutes later Rob entered the room. He shook my hand and sat down across from me. We talked for about 10 minutes, giving me a bunch of music and metal wisdom. I tried to soak up all the information like a sponge. My nerves quickly went away. He made me feel like a friend more than a fan. I now got to tell my friends that I did end up meeting him. At this point they probably didn't care because I kept going back and forth between meeting him and not meeting him.

Interviews

Getting to Know Leona Taylor: Through Writing Shane Graham

What was the most challenging thing when writing your piece?

The most challenging part for me is always the revising. I always get so goal oriented with my endings that I find it difficult to get around the middle. That and keeping a consistent tense, that's always been an issue with me. I'm not really a world builder either, I tend to ignore the setting when it's not visual. It's something I've been working on fixing.

What was the easiest part of writing "Marcus", or was it a tough process?

The easiest for me is dialogue, I love writing characters and their personalities. The conversation between them was very fun for me to write. I flew through writing the dialogue, the only hard part was making it make sense logically.

What writer or writers do you take influence from when writing a dark piece like "Marcus"?

I took a lot of inspiration from a German horror film called 'Hello Mommy'; I thought it was brilliant. I also found the dynamic between Thor and Loki very interesting to work with.

How do you decide how dark you want your pieces to be? Do you have a set goal in mind or do you just feel it out throughout the writing process?

I always have a set goal in mind on where I want the scene to climax. My favorites are sort of cinematic moments. I think my goal in the darkness of this piece and other pieces isn't really to shock, but to tell a tale of tragedy.

How long did it take for you to say "Okay this piece is just about done" or do you still feel as if you want to continue revising it?

The second I finish I usually come out of my focused state to jump up and down about how I've written something I think is brilliant. Though, reading it later, revisions are paramount. But yes, I feel finished once I feel I can share it with people I want to impress. I find that a lot of my standards lie with people I admire. Though that isn't what success is, it's just how I've felt in the moment.

When you first sit down to write a piece, what is the first thing you do?

Well, if it's a shorter piece like a short story, I immediately start thinking of ideas, and when I'm hit with something really good, I've got to write the whole thing. When it's something really long like the book I'm working on, I come up with ideas and outline it. I research absolutely everything

What was your goal with “Marcus”?

My goal was to create a deep bond between two characters who are in a frightening moment. I wanted the image of two people who needed to depend on each other in a crisis. I also liked the drama that would ensue with a twist, the sadness, the fear. I think it's like art really

In three words, how would you describe writing and how it is important to you?

Bring to life. (It's very important for me to work toward taking a scene in my head and bringing it into a real moment. I see my characters mind's very clearly, and I try so hard to take the visual and sounds from them and make others feel it too.)

“Monsters and Snipers”: Interview with Ryan Guerin

Alyiah Sinkler



Ryan Guerin is a student at Monroe Community College. He has written two short stories, one about a girl who gets turned into a mythical creature, and the second one being about a sniper preying on his next victim. His stories consist of horror and action, usually combining the two elements.

Tell us a bit more about Echidna; what led to her becoming a monster?

“Echidna is a mythical figure from Greek mythology, often called “The Mother of Monsters”. She birthed many of the most famous Greek monsters with her husband typhon. The girl the story isn’t named Echidna. However, I thought that her becoming a monster and creating more was a fitting parallel that I could reference.”

What inspired you to write this?

“I grew up reading Stephen King, as well as Science Fiction stories. One concept I really enjoyed was that of hive-minds. I thought that the body-horror of changing a human into something malevolent was a fitting idea for a horror story.”

What about the horror genre do you love?

“I like the fact that horror stories allow us to explore the darkness of humanity, as well as nature. You don’t need to censor yourself with what you write about with a horror story as opposed to other genres”

Rosetta's Fantasy

Rachel Wakefield

“I want to tell these stories as raw and as real as possible.”

Interviewer Rachel is a 27-year-old fiction writer from Rochester NY.

What draws you to write stories centered around abuse?

It was just something in me, that these specific stories need to be told. I like writing real characters, and real characters and real people go through real shit. Am I writing it perfectly? No. Every story is going to be different. I've personally never experienced it, so there's going to be a level I'm just not going to have.

But somewhere deep down in me, I felt these stories had to be told. A life contains abuse and pain, and the idea of watching a character overcome something is really powerful to me as a writer.



How do the magical themes relate to your writing style?

My writing style has formed over years of role-playing online and text-based role-play settings. So, it just became imbued into my writing. It kind of gives the reader the impression that it's a thin veil for real issues.

What is the importance behind the eye color?

It's not actually just the eye color, it goes for their hair as well and their clothing. It's a race called Gemlord that I created. I was role-playing with some friends online and they were like "Do you realize this is metaphor for racism". If it was coming out subconsciously it needed to come out consciously. I just purposely chose to focus on race because of how it evolved subconsciously. Maybe I'm not the right person to talk about this, but I feel like if I have a voice and I can talk to people who are white I'll be the messenger.

What is the reason you chose the abuser to be the fem presenting character?

I felt that it was important to see the roles reversed from how we as a society view abuse. **I want to tell these stories as raw and as real as possible.** And so to have this aspect of flipping the switch makes some people that aren't aware of this type of violence aware of it. Also, I feel that male domestic abuse victims don't speak up as much because of societal norms. So, for male abuse victims to see themselves in a story, and say someone recognizes this as a problem, maybe I can speak about it. And I'm sure much of that abuse has come from women. And sometimes I

feel that the media pushes aside male abuse in favor of female abuse. As a female, I don't want to be like all women are victims and all men are abusers because it's not true.

In the Roots: A Deeper Conversation on Voodoo and Hoodoo

Rosetta Famellette



Alyiah Sinkler is a creative writing student at Monroe community college who enjoys horror movies and writes about her Caribbean heritage.

With “In the Roots,” I wanna show that voodoo isn’t inherently good or bad, it’s just a religion.

RF: I know this story is based on real experiences, so if you’re willing, will you tell us what inspired you to write this piece?

AS: Growing up Christian, it’s my mom’s one true belief, anything else was fake. Even at a young age I questioned “is God really real?” I’d question my aunt, “why do you love God?” Looking back, that’s really out of pocket, but I was a kid and kids say out of pocket things. When I saw “Princess and the Frog,” and saw the Shadow Man doing voodoo, I was like wow, that’s really cool, I wanna learn to do that. Even if it was portrayed in a negative light, I still thought it was interesting. With “In the Roots,” I wanna show that voodoo isn’t inherently good or bad, it’s just a religion.

RF: Yea, that makes a lot of sense. And would you say that’s true of all religions?

AS: Oh, definitely.

RF: I see that you mention Sirena’s mother is white-skinned while her father is dark-skinned. Could you explain why that’s important to the story?

AS: Hispanic is not a race. Because a lot of Hispanics identify with their ethnicity, it tends to trip people up. Hispanics are a mix of Spanish, African, and Taino- the indigenous Caribbean people. There’s Black Hispanics, White Hispanics, indigenous Hispanics, or they could be a mix of those. Sirena’s mom is Euro-Hispanic, and because voodoo and hoodoo are closed practices for those of African descent, it’s closed off to her. Her father is African-American. She does get a little bit of knowledge about hoodoo from her aunts, but not in the same sense because they still incorporate their practice with the religion of Christianity.

RF: Is there a reason you mix voodoo and hoodoo with Christianity for this story?

AS: That’s what I grew up with, both of my parents are Christian. Like Sirena’s dad in the story, he’s of course based on my dad. He’s still very tolerant of other beliefs. I even told him I wanted to do hoodoo and he made a little joke not to put a curse on him.” That’s how we joke around. A

few of my aunts and cousins used to do witchcraft- which is different but in the same category. If I were to tell my mom, she would freak out.

RF: I really like the scene where Sirena scatters candy at the stop sign and feels awkward about it. What sparked that scene in your mind?

AS: I was doing a little bit more research on the lwa, the voodoo deities. Papa Legba, he's not only the guardian of our realm and the spirit realm, but also of the crossroads. The two main offerings were coins and candy, so I thought "What if I have her go to a crossroad and leave a little offering?" Because this is like the first time she's displaying it like, in the public, not in her room.

Rachel Wakefield: The Dance. The Fight. The Journey.

Justine Alfano

“I truly love to DANCE around and ruminate on issues and how to overcome them.”

Rachel, before we embark, what are some of your favorite hobbies [outside of writing], and what does THE ideal day look like to you? I like rock climbing, yoga, and reading. Ideally, I'd spend the day with my boyfriend, starting with a stroll through the farmers market, then maybe hit up a yoga class with my best friend Janelle. Finishing with dinner back at home. [My Boyfriend cooks because he's so much better at it than me].

It's clear that you LOVE to write in the Sci-Fi genre. What is it about this genre that feels most important to you? I love that Sci-Fi offers me the opportunity for social commentary, that I can pick something in society that I see as a problem, or as a positive thing, and expand on it in a hypothetical way.



Do you have to have the whole story planned out in your head before you can start putting words on paper? Or do you like writing and seeing where the characters might take you? I love to write and see where the characters take me. I'm terrible at plotting a story, I have an idea of the beats I want to hit and endings, but I like to go on a JOURNEY with my characters.

It's said that all writers experience writer's block at one point or another. Assuming you have as well, what helps you break out of it? I truly love to DANCE around and ruminate on issues and how to overcome them. Most of my writing is super personal or I find a way to write a personal story through metaphors and fictional scenarios.

I am fascinated by the white gloves in *The Dance*. What made you choose this image? I chose the white gloves as a metaphor for both white supremacy and the access they provide, and when they become soiled and stained, it is a representation of having blood on their hands from resources and power they hoard.

There are strong themes of alienation in your work. What is it about this theme that feels close to you, or most important? Isolation is my coping mechanism, it's a very intimate part of my life, and I've spent years FIGHTING against it. I think it's something that our society leans toward and encourages, and it only disservices us as individuals and as a community so, it's important to me to draw attention to its consequences.

You'll be graduating soon, Congratulations! What's your next big step? I want to take some time off and focus on my writing. After a year or two I do plan to go back and get my doctorate so that I can teach at the collegiate level. **How do you plan on spending your summer?** I have a few trips planned to California, Maine, and Rhode Island. I'm hoping that the travel will inspire and expand my writing.

Justine Alfano is a creative writing student at Monroe Community College and the Director of Production at BOA Editions Ltd. She has plans to further her education at SUNY Brockport, in hopes of becoming a graphic novelist.

Expression and the Self: An Interview with Kate Roberts

Sean Nash

“You don’t owe anyone your trauma... Write it for yourself and shove it in a drawer, or show it to a handful of people, or burn it- only do what you’re comfortable with.”

Kate Roberts is a Creative Writing Student at Monroe Community College. She writes poetry that explores her own life experiences with grief, happiness, and the depth of emotions & memory.

What Draws you to writing poetry?

Poetry lets me explore an idea without needing to be as concerned with making sure it follows a narrative. I'm often trying to get to the heart of an emotion, and it's very freeing to be able to link together images and metaphors. It lets me get weird with how to explain things rather than feeling forced into a linear narrative.

How do you think that your own experiences and self-expression factors into your writing?

Most, if not all, of my poetry explores an emotion or memory of mine. For me, a lot of value comes from trying to pin a specific instance of an emotion down on a page. Often I'll change details and try to heighten the emotions for clarity.

As someone who writes a lot of poetry, where do you think your style differs from poem to poem and how does it reach that point? Do you find yourself in a new mindset every time you write?

I'm finding myself invoking a specific emotion, usually in that headspace when I sit down to write the first draft. They're usually made of very fragmented lines but generally have a similar voice and style. From around the second or third draft onwards is where I start figuring what the poem should sound or look like - usually I'll try to find a section of the piece that feels like it's working better than the rest and then try to heighten those aspects.

What piece of your writing do you think best represents your own story?

Either Chrysanthemum Sunshine or Stained Glass. It depends whether I feel like falling into grief or clawing my way out of it. It's more important on a given day.

Guided Meditation for Self-Improvement is meant to try to physically mimic what attempting to make progress while dealing with depression feels like.

What tips do you have for other poets and writers that seek to express themselves in their writing?

First and foremost, you don't owe anyone your trauma. It doesn't matter if it'd make a good story, if it's not something you want out there, don't put it out there. Write it for yourself and shove it in a drawer, or show it to a handful of people, or burn it - only do what you're comfortable with. Figure out what about your experience is important for this piece specifically.

Then who your intended audience is. Both will help shape what details to include, which elements to focus on, choices about language and tone, etc. A strictly factual account of an event will vary wildly in detail, tone, and word choice from an account focusing on emotion instead. Finally, I'm personally a fan of plausible deniability. This obviously doesn't apply if you're intending to claim piece as creative nonfiction, but if you're working with fiction or poetry, you don't need to explain how much the piece is your personal experience and how much is straight up fiction if you don't want to.

What is the future for you and your writing?

I'm working on a long-form fiction piece, but progress is slow, it's still in the outlining stage, and I'm pretty sure everyone and their dog is working on a novel, so the only thing I'll say about it is that I have an honest to God red-string-board I call my murder board that I've been using for outlining. In terms of poems, I've got ideas for pieces about feeling left behind and about the intersection between impostor syndrome and depression.

Sean Nash is a Creative Writing Student at MCC. Finding inspiration in old folk tales, Sean is enamored with the genres of horror and complex fantasy, something he wishes to be published for one day

She's the Author; Interview with Teresa Ingram

S.R. Banks



Teresa Ingram is a lifelong resident of the Bronx, NYC, with stops in Harlem, NY, and Tampa, FL. She is a senior Creative Writing major at SUNY-Monroe Community College and is projected to graduate this Spring. Teresa is the mother of a 22-year-old daughter, a senior theater major at The City College of New York, also projected to graduate this Spring. Teresa writes memoirs, flash fiction, short stories, and short plays. Her goal is to become a published author.

“I think that my strength as a writer is my ability to turn my experiences into relatable stories and touch people in unexpected ways.”

Shenani B: When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

Teresa Ingram: *I have been in love with the written word since I was a very small child. I was able to read at the age of three, and I think I have been cultivating a love for writing since I could read. I did not truly feel a calling to write professionally until about two years ago.*

Shenani B: Okay, okay, cool. Now, who or what inspired you to write?

Teresa Ingram: *My own lived experiences are what inspire me to write. The more I live, learn, and grow, the more I get the sense that I have stories to tell that could affect or help another person, particularly women.*

SB: Those are strong words. Very inspiring. What would you say is your strength as a writer?

TI: *I think that my strength as a writer is my ability to turn my experiences into relatable stories, and touch people in unexpected ways. There is the saying, “The devil is in the details,” but I find that the heart is also in the details. Being able to delve into the heart of a matter is where I find strength as well as revelation. I hope that my readers will find the same.*

SB: Powerful! I know you're an adult learner, as I am, why did you decide to go back to college?

TI: *My decision to enroll in college goes back to my 22-year-old daughter's childhood. We always discussed college, and she was very solid about her desire to attend. In the meantime, I started but never finished my degree. The pandemic began a period of struggle for her, and I thought that if I became a student along with her, we could struggle through it together. It has*

been one of the best decisions of my life, as it has reinvigorated in me a forgotten love, which is writing. I am completing my associate's degree this spring, and she is also completing her bachelor's this spring.

SB: That's awesome Teresa! Children definitely will make your outlook on life change. And congratulations to you for graduating this year! As a writer, how do you manage your work schedule?

TI: *In addition to being an adult learner, I am also a disabled learner. I was diagnosed with kidney failure in 2009 and began dialysis in 2010. I was blessed to receive a kidney transplant on Father's Day 2016, but there are some lingering issues following the transplant, so here I am, fairly free to make my schedule and write whenever creativity calls. I am sort of old-school, so I never leave home without pen and paper. So, when an idea hits me, I can write it down and start turning it around in my mind.*

SB: WOW! God is good! You are more than a conqueror! Let's talk about Slippery When Wet. Why did you feel the need to share your story?

TI: *I was inspired to tell that particular part of my story by a friend who happened to be in that space where I was. Where you experience that first red flag that you don't recognize as being a red flag for whatever reason, also, so many of us hide abuse in all its forms, and I want to push it into the light. My thinking was let's talk about it; let's examine it. I hope that someone will read it and it will help them in some way.*

SB: I agree! I'm glad you felt safe in yourself to do so, thank you! Dreams or Reality is a different change from Slippery. What inspired that piece?

TI: *I started Dreams as a change of pace, as well as a change of genre. I wanted to lighten things up a bit and step away from everything being so personal when I write.*

SB: You are also working on a new piece, To Kick or Twirl, tell me a little about that.

TI: *This piece is non-fiction, but it marks a special period in time for my daughter, so it makes me smile. It is a shorter piece, more of a flash piece, which is where a lot of my work starts.*

SB: What would you like your reader to take from your work? What do they think of your work?

TI: *I hope my readers can relate to my stories in some way, and possibly see themselves or someone they know, gain strength or some forward movement in their lives. I hope that my writing will be something that people can get lost in and come out with peace or revelation.*

SB: Awesome Teresa. Well, we are wrapping up, and it's been a pleasure. Let's end with one more question. What is your end goal?

TI: *I would love to be able to call myself a "published author," whether that ends up being a novel, my essays, or short stories. Or maybe all of the above, which would be a gift.*

Elements of Horror: An Interview with Sean Nash

Ryan Guerin

Recently, I had the chance to conduct an interview with Sean Nash, an up-and-coming writer based out of the Rochester area.

Question: What inspired you to write?

I'm a big fan of old fantasy epics and more specifically, mythologies and old folk tales. The concept of folk tales is something that is fascinating to me. Stories that are designed to explain the world or to warn about specific behavior through the construction of stories. I find myself fascinated by these explanations of the world and find myself diving deeper and deeper into many different cultures to see how they shaped their perception of the world through different tales. I hope one day I can write something that can share that level of significance to culture to create archetypes in modern literature. Strangely enough, I'm not a big fan of modern horror novels and stories. I find them a bit bland, but they still do a good job depending on the author and the topic.

Question: What inspired you to write these stories?

I think for *Eyes Like Stars* my main desire to write the story came from my own exploration in reading and writing horror fiction and a desire to put some meaning into a genre that can typically be nothing but a message-less horror show. Peira's experience with loneliness is not something alien to my own life, and I think that was important enough for me to put onto the page. As a big fan of horror, I think that the medium is useful for putting people into the height of anxiety so that they can internalize and feel the emotions of the main character more personally because aspects of horror force themselves to share in that typical feeling of despair.

The Devotion of My Attention came from an exploration of my own past-view of self-obsessed perfection and then turning that ideal up to insane levels. The piece at times felt like it wouldn't go anywhere but the more I wrote, the simpler it became to exploit the use of simplicity that is the nature of flash fiction. I realized that I didn't need the right story arc, but just the one that would be the most satisfying while still wrapped within a strange and eccentric perception of the world. I really enjoyed the ability to use all that strange diction that I learned in High School and in reading Old-English folk stories.

The Cries is the weirdest and most difficult piece I've written in terms of pure technical prowess. It's hard to get my point across while relying on aspects of purposefully obscured information and needing to lie to both the reader and to the characters that I was writing. My specific inspiration came from my own self-exploration into dual narratives and character foils all wrapped into one piece. It's hard to write but I think the point about separate perspectives is an important one. Without that aspect, I don't think the piece would be anywhere near complete and would ultimately just be hollow.

Out of everything I've had to write, I can say that *Her Face* feels like my biggest failure and point of growth. I wanted to write about loss and the overwhelming crushing feeling of depression. I really wanted to channel that. But I could never channel that feeling of loss without knowing it myself or without some research. Both things that I felt like I failed to do. But I still pushed through. As it stands, the piece feels as complete as I can make it from my own personal

experiences, and I think that if I were to try and push it further it would just be disingenuous. I'm happy with it, but I need to revisit it to capture everything that I wanted to put into it, as much as I love it and I cherish it, I still don't like that I can make it as complete as I want it to be.

When asked if he had any plans for the future, he said he didn't want to give too much away, but he did state that he would "write something strange to hie everything that is important."

Sean Nash is a Writer that lives in the Rochester area. He has written multiple short stories including the Cries, Eyes like Stars, Her Face, Devotion to my Attention, and more.

Ryan Guerin is a writer who lives in the Rochester Area. He has written short stories such as One Shot, Echidna, Justice through Vengeance, and more.

Justine Alfano: Journeys in Writing

Kate Roberts



What is your favorite part of the writing process and why? What do you find enjoyable or satisfying about it? Writing my first draft is one of my favorite parts. I'm *that* writer who feels like they *need* to have everything figured out before they can begin, so the moment I finally allow words to flow across the page is exhilarating, and therapeutic, because by this point I've driven myself mad.

A lot of your work examines the breakdown of relationships, both romantic and familial. What draws you to this motif? I think all writing and storytelling examines the breakdown of relationships in some capacity...I'd like to think my work builds those relationships more than it breaks them by the end. I'm always trying to strengthen something, whether it's between my characters or the speaker's relationship with self.

"I pay more attention and appreciate the little details in life."

You've described yourself as a very imagery focused writer, and "Wildflowers" has a very clear sense of visual space. Can you talk more about that? What does that mean for you? How does that impact your writing process? Imagery impacts my writing style immensely. Crafting images and making things as vivid and stimulating as possible is the fun part of it all. Developing this love for crafting imagery has also made me process the world differently; I pay more attention and appreciate the little details in life more than I ever have before.

"A Single Spark" is a very vulnerable piece. What drew you to write/share it? This is a story I felt like I had to write—it's a memory that haunts me, not as much now as it did then, but it's one

that stuck. I hope it shows that one negative choice can impact inspire hundreds of positive ones if we make the right decision to try and do better next time.

Second person point-of-view isn't often used. What made you decide to use it for “A Single Spark?” Professor Maria Brandt suggested that I use second person so that “you” becomes a metaphor for all the people I will continue to try my best and help. “You” is you; it becomes more than just a story about a homeless man in my life, but about the promise I’m offering you as the audience, as anyone. I love this concept, and it matches what I want to convey with this story. But it’s definitely a form that I’m not practiced in. It has its own unique set of challenges.

What accomplishment or achievement are you most proud of? Why? I’m most proud of graduating. I know that might sound cliché, but I never thought I’d be a college student, especially for something creative, because I was always encouraged to pick a trade or something more “lucrative” and “stable.” Making the decision to follow one of my passions is one of the greatest choices I’ve ever made, and I’m finally starting to feel whole.

Things People Do That Piss You Off at Work

Leona Taylor



Shenani Banks. Born and raised in Rochester, NY. She loves and adores her son. Shenani is a writer, poet, actor, musical artist, and now a published author. She's coached basketball for over 17 years. Her first published book was last year, *Things People Do That Piss You Off at Work*. She is currently looking to convert it into a movie that she is currently writing.

"I used a lot of the sarcasm that I have. I try to focus on some of the things I say and do when people make me mad." – Shenani Banks

How long does it typically take you to write Scripts and books?

This is the first book and that took me three months to write. The script usually could take like a year. It depends on you really. The writer and how dedicated they are.

How has your son influenced or motivated your work?

Just by being alive. I've always been writing but when I had him, I wanted to do so much more. He's my biggest supporter. He encourages me.

Is coaching basketball something you see yourself continuing to do?

Probably, in the future I'd like to coach college basketball. I've been coaching for 18 years so that's the next thing on my agenda.

How much of 'Stop asking me for money' Is true experiences you've had?

Very true. There had always been this guy I used to work with (one of my friends). Every day he would ask me for a quarter or 50 cents, or even a dollar. That was one of the experiences that I've had. When I started to write the book, I just thought of him. He's not the only person who's done that, but that part was mainly about him because he'd do it way more than anyone else.

What do you feel was the hardest part about getting your book published?

The hardest part was trying to get a literary agent. I still haven't found one. Another hard part was the money. I ended up self-publishing with a real publisher, but I had to pay for it. It took me a while because when the pandemic hit, I wasn't working as much and didn't have the money.

How much say did you have in the way your book was edited? Would you change anything?

I had a lot of say but, I'd definitely go back and change things. One thing is, I didn't edit the edited copy. I was supposed to make sure the punctuation was correct but since I was so happy, I sort of skimmed it. Then when I read it back, I was thinking 'This isn't supposed to be there.' I'd definitely go back and re-edit a lot of it.

In the script 'Things people do that piss you off at work', we are introduced to the character of Stacy. What is special about Stacy that you felt the need to make her your star?

Contrary to popular belief, Stacy is not like me. Even though the story is based on my experiences, I'm not Stacy. I made her the star because I wanted her to be my opposite. She's not approachable, and she's angry all of the time. I was thinking about men in movies and thinking 'We've never seen a woman really be upset. They're usually so nice. Unless it's an action movie. They're still a bit motherly.' So I wanted to take that away.

How did you create the inner dialogue of the very lively character of Stacy within the script?

I used a lot of the sarcasm that I have. I try to focus on some of the things I say and do when people make me mad.

What do you feel was the importance of the line "I know you like to be 'extra' clean."

It relates to the fact that I have OCD. I don't like to touch certain things. When I sit in chairs, I sometimes pray over them. When I go out to eat, I use plastic silverware and cups. If I can use a paper plate, I'll do it. Before the pandemic, I always had hand sanitizer and handwipes. When I go to hotels, I don't use their sheets. I have two bottles of Lysol and Clorox wipes and do a sterile cleaning. I'll use my own sheets and bed covers. I'm just a very clean person, besides the car.

Do you have any more plans in the future when it comes to content you would like to write?

I would like to write a follow up of this script, It's in production. It's called "I'm still pissed! At work." Also, I write children's books as well, although I stopped because it's hard to find an illustrator. Something that was on my mind was writing a children's book about my sons' life. Me and my son, and then my movie. I wrote a movie in high school also, but I never did anything with it.

An Interview with Shane Graham

Teresa Ingram



Hilton, NY's Shane Graham found his passion for music and writing in his youth. Age did not dim his passions; if anything, they grew. Shane is honored to share his writing with everyone.

My favorite genres to write are non-fiction and horror; I would like to create my master horror piece

Shane, what a pleasure it is to be talking with you today. Let's jump right in: when did you first fall in love with writing?

When I was young, I loved to draw. I would make my own characters, but I wouldn't do much with them. I knew I liked writing starting in about first-second grade, and soon after I would begin to make stories with the characters I drew. I started off drawing little comics with very short stories, but as I progressed through elementary school I would find that I really enjoyed telling an actual story.

What is your process like when you want to begin a new piece?

Typically I never sit down and say "Okay I need to write something new here", that would just brew stale and forced ideas. If I am writing personal non-fiction, I will look back on things and just want to capture that moment in time, so I try to recall it as best as I can. When writing fiction, it is almost always because I was influenced I will have a very small idea from a movie or short film and grow it into something larger.

What is the genre you feel you do best Writing in?

Writing about personal stories comes easiest to me. This is probably because the ideas are already there, but I thoroughly enjoy looking back in time and trying to re-tell something that was pivotal in my life.

In “Slammed Door,” the details you provide are so lush, and then the piece ends with a vision that this may have possibly been video game play. How do you conceive your pieces’ endings?

In my endings I try to leave some questions. This leaves open the idea of a sequel to that piece. It also allows the reader to create their own idea of what could have happened. This also comes from writing music. I think it is best when you can’t totally tell what a song is truly about, so the listener creates their own ideas.

In “Gut Feeling,” the reader is transported to a concert where you get to meet your idol. Again, a piece rich with detail but a story with a completely different edge. How do you choose the topics or events that you write about?

A lot of my pieces have come from assignments in school, even some from elementary, but this doesn’t mean they are forced. I will get excited when I see an opportunity to tell a story I have already started brainstorming about.

Finally, we have the masterful “Involuntary Exclusion,” a piece I would call poetic prose. From where inside Shane Graham does such a piece emanate?

This piece originally started as a song, but I felt it could be turned into a great poem. I have always cared deeply about animals and their habitat, I wanted to create something that exposes the damages we have done over time.

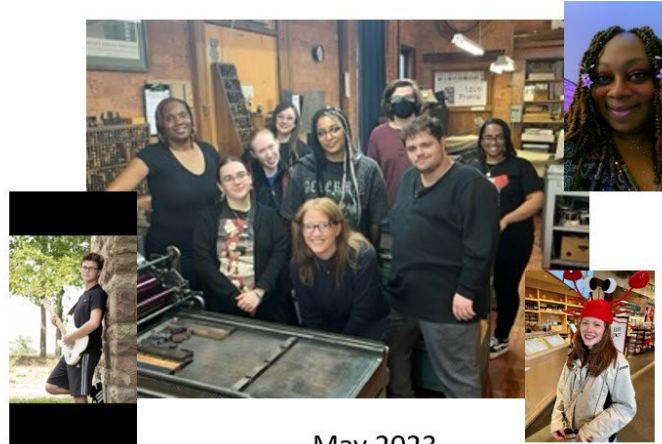
Let’s talk about home. What were your growing up years like, and how influential have they been in your writing?

In small Hilton, New York, where cornfields are more popular than houses and buildings. My friends and I would often go in the woods and find some adventure to go on. We’d create scenarios and scare ourselves. My young creative mind never fully went away, so this carried over to writing.

What’s new & exciting in the life of Shane?

I am excited to see what’s next. All throughout my life writing has been somewhat tied to school. I am looking forward to putting my full attention to pieces that I am 100% passionate about.

ENG 273 Class Photo



May 2023

From left to right, Shane Graham, S.R. Banks, Rosetta Famellette, Kate Roberts, Justine Alfano, Leona Taylor, Maria Brant, Sean Nash, Ryan Guerin, Alyiah Sinkler, Teresa Ingram, and Rachel Wakefield.

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In order of appearance;

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Ryan Guerin is a student at MCC, working towards a creative writing degree. He has written short stories such as echidna, one shot, and more. A fan of fantasy, science fiction, Military fiction, and horror, he likes to write about the myriad of ideas in his head.

Rosetta Famellette is a Creative Writing student at Monroe Community College. She won 2nd place in the 2022 Student Writing Awards with her non-fiction piece "Her Last Breath." However, her focus is in creating fantasy stories addressing topics such as abuse, trauma, LGBTQ+ issues, identity, mental illness, healing, and the human experience. In her spare time she likes to draw her characters, collect crystals, and blog about her writing journey. She enjoys driving her Honda Civic and listening to the Weeknd. You can find her blog at <https://www.rosettafamellette.com/>.

Alyiah Sinkler is a Creative Writing major at MCC, and she's been writing since she was a kid. Her main reason for pursuing writing is it's a great way for her imagination to come to life. She's looking to pursue a career in screenwriting and fiction writing.

Rachel Wakefield is a 27-year-old writer from Rochester, NY. After graduating with a degree in Psychology, Rachel returned to college to pursue her love of writing. Rachel began writing as a hobby when she was 7-years-old. Prior to that, she enjoyed telling stories around the fire at her grandparents' in the summer and reading.

Kate Roberts is a creative writing major at Monroe Community College. She lives in Upstate New York with her two cats.

Teresa Ingram is a lifelong resident of the Bronx, NYC, with stops in Harlem, NY and Tampa, FL. She is a senior Creative Writing major at SUNY-Monroe Community College projected to graduate this Spring. Teresa is the mother of a 22-year-old daughter, a senior Theater major at The City College of New York, also projected to graduate this Spring. Teresa writes memoir, flash fiction, short stories, and short plays. Her goal is to become a published author.

Sean Nash is a student at MCC pursuing a future in Writing. Enamored with folk tales and legends, Sean aspires to wrap readers in despairing horror and worlds of complex fantasy.

Justine Alfano (she/her) is a Creative Writing student at Monroe Community College and the Director of Production at BOA Editions, a publishing house in Rochester. She has plans to further her education at SUNY Brockport one day and become a graphic novelist.

Shenani (S.R.) Banks was born and raised in Rochester, NY. She loves and adores her son. She is a writer, poet, actor, musical artist, and now a published author. Her first published book was last year, *Things People Do That Piss You Off At Work*.

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