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SPRING  
2021

# **Monroe Community College**

## **2021 Creative Writing Capstone**

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

- Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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## Author Bios

From Rochester, New York, starting as an environmental science major. **A'Viyannia Billingslea** took a path of Creative Writing to raise awareness where it lacked. Her writing is mostly environmentally based, with a touch of global realities. With the goal to spread an impacting message among all age groups.

**Carli Lo Cigno** is currently studying Creative Writing and is hoping to pursue a career in editing for a publishing house or a newspaper company. She enjoys reading mysteries, as well as contemporary romances, and would like to write her own novels someday. Carli writes short fiction and has written several works of poetry, in addition to a play. She desires for her audience to be captured by the transparency and kindness of her characters.

**Isabella Miller** will earn an Associates in Creative Writing at the end of this year with plans to transfer to Binghamton. Her work is informed by equal parts wit, sensitivity, and insight. Izzy's interested in branding and digital marketing from a literary angle.

**V. Lamphere** is an avid writer of fiction, particularly favoring the fantasy genre. Much of their work is based off of mythology and folklore, with a focus on mostly LGBTQ+ characters. Often, they write novels with their co-author and friend, Saicha, and the pair hopes to publish the stories they have written both together and independently.

**Mia Newman** is a new writer and currently a Creative Writing major attending Monroe Community College in New York. She is focusing on creative nonfiction and playwriting and plans on continuing her education at Binghamton University.

**Reatha** is currently a Creative Writing major attending Monroe Community College originally from Buffalo, New York. She was once a journalism major but after two semesters realized she wanted to pursue writing full time. She is now focusing on creative fiction and nonfiction writing and plans on continuing her education at Brockport University with a double major in International Studies.

**Emily L. Newsome** is a college student pursuing a Creative Writing degree. She has published short stories in *The Writing Disorder Literary Journal* and Monroe Community College's literary magazine *Cabbages & Kings*, was a second-place winner of the 2021 Langlois Short Fiction Award and the 2021 Callan Research Essay Award, and was a winner of the Spring 2020 and 2021 Sixth Act Playwriting Competitions.

**Vanessa Renee** found love in writing not too long ago at MCC. She will soon be published in *Borrowed Solace Literary Magazine*, and in the college's publication, *Cabbages & Kings*, where she is a co-editor. Recently, she placed second for the Rice Award in MCC's English Department Writing Competition for a creative nonfiction essay. In the coming years, she plans to expand her education of words and communication.

**Brennan Sprague** writes poems and lives in Rochester, NY. A 2020 Best of the Net nominee and finalist for the 2019 Adroit Prize, his work has appeared in *Schlag Magazine*, *Afternoon Visitor*, *Vallum Magazine*, *Glass*, *Ghost City Press*, *Jet Fuel Review* and *The Adroit Journal*. He is currently pursuing his Associates Degree at Monroe Community College.

**Brianna Thomas** has a passion for Creative Writing. She loves to write about practically anything but her favorite genres include action and romance. She loves to create a female character who has the task of breaking traditions and feeling liberated. Some of her pieces have adjusted the female character with different perspectives and challenges. Brianna is proud of her work and continues to work hard every day to become a better writer.

# Glittering

by Brennan Sprague

The clearest photograph of the sun looks like a head of hair, These exponential strands of burning flares.  
Once I looked up

Cancer rising bald to find out if my astrological placement That determines your physical appearance  
leads to baldness

And instead found countless links upon links upon links About people with cancer. I can be dumb,  
vain, clueless.

I watch videos on the internet of strangers climbing Sickeningly tall infrastructures without harnesses

And my knees go weak. To flirt with death Like they have nice teeth. The birds in the sky

Levitate, spellbound. They flock in great formations. Solemn, humbling; here stuck to the grass, its  
blades

Intonations of future lives; to pick one from the earth And scythe it gently across my arm, the earth  
moving

So slow beneath us, deep shadows of summer dusk. The clothesline & its clean sheets haunt the breeze.

Honeysuckle & forsythia drift from their glass vases Out of crutched windows into the circle of quiet  
air.

The jaws of bumblebees sheathed around pollinated Tongues. Are you fluent in your own self-  
destruction?

Do you remember when you began? A gloom of stars Roaring wild in the night, all string and yarn, all  
beams

Of light gossiped around the ancient gravitational lurch Of the air? Confused, I stood alone in the  
lawn gleaming

Blue from the July moon, imagined all the worlds beyond Our own—the lost addresses of our past, the  
translucent

Curtains of windows fluttering in our excavated sternums, The dark & its mirrors poured in the forests where I once

Explored the bone of summer listening for the struck axe— When I heard it, it implied my tongue spoke of nothing

But forgiveness. Yes, our fathers exist there, stranded inside The TV screen's smolder. The breath of cold living rooms,

They die slow deaths, attuned to the clarion of fallen trees. Some might call it beauty, beauty extinguished with the flick

Of a wrist, the cavalry of the near future summoning, Or ice-coated lakes cracked by footstep, or the fearless

Climbing those buildings without hesitation, these buildings We've built that could reach the clear eternal,

The complete unknown—

And there, fringed on the curb of sound, a glittering  
Of rabbits wander the lucid snow.

# Moths

by V. Lamphere

Miraslava couldn't remember when she died.

She knows she must have. Because she's no longer clutching numbly at the gushing wound, fruitlessly trying to keep her guts from spilling out. A river rushes beside her, but these are not the snowy, frigid banks she died on. Damp grass and snowdrops line a pretty, pebbled slope. Wherever she is, it's not heaven. But she doesn't think this is hell, either.

Shaking, she peels a hand away from her torso, one dark eye warily cracked open to stare at it. No blood. But there must have been. Terrible, terrible amounts of blood—she can remember, the vivid trail of crimson left behind; splattered and splotched and full of gaps from where she'd been tumbling, falling down the sheer hillside into the river. Here, though... Miraslava runs her other hand through the grass, tugging, trying to understand why this all suddenly feels very real. Her soul must have drifted off path, or maybe this is a dying dream. A very vivid dream. She could think of no other way to explain it. Because though she cannot remember the exact moment, she remembers the fading. When the world no longer felt so cold, when the warmth, lightness, crept up on her. And the darkness. Surely she had died, somewhere between here and then.

A sound like cloaks fluttering through the air catches her attention, and Miraslava turns, half expecting to find some spirit or other airing their laundry. At this point, it would not have been so strange.

But what she sees—what she hears—is stranger.

“Lozhustenie, ciodnyak biezeanith thade dreev pién lopsip? Lozhustenie, malittenja dua?”

Miraslava blinks, her mouth hanging open halfway between surprise and a desperate question. Before her is a stern, feminine face. Dark, solemn eyes set in peach-tan skin, coils of ebony brown hair resting over black and russet feathers. So, so many feathers... and though a human face stares back at her, the rest of their body is entirely bird.

“What—what are you?” Miraslava asks, pausing to wet her lips, mouth feeling much too dry as she asks the real question on her mind: “Where are we?”

Without knowing this creature, she understands that they are speaking to her. The only problem being their words, a garbled tangle of sounds both human and bird, of syllables so familiar to her native tongue then transformed into something utterly alien. But the creature knows. Miraslava can see it, that in those solemn, watery eyes, they know the answer.

“Na easodzie, pand wadoj.”

Miraslava slowly sits up, keeping an eye on this creature as they tilt their head to stare at her. She can't tell if the gesture is more human or bird. “Who are you?” She asks, voice softer. “Gamayun.”

That's the first answer Miraslava understands. Her eyes widen, and she carefully inches towards the Gamayun, who perches halfway standing in the stream. A creature of fairy tales—or a god, or goddess, all depending on who tells the story. But one thing remains the same. Gamayun, is the bird of prophecy. More knowledgeable than all the gods.

“You know, then,” Miraslava says, staring in awe as she feels her heart quake, stirred to beating once more by fear or inspiration. “You know why I'm here... and what will happen.”

“Tas, paslischen, dzildca. Vyy chočancit knieda? Chaut kat usviyne viedakno? Vyy hatoviing?” She doesn't understand their language, but Miraslava doesn't think she has to. She nods, willing to face whatever wisdom, whatever prophecy they have for her, and Gamayun's face blurs, going soft as if all the bones have vanished. Eyes stretch and loll out until their face pulls back into place—and it is Artur's. Miraslava flinches, instinctively swinging out to slap it away. He couldn't be here—he, he couldn't have followed her *here*, when Miraslava doesn't even know where she is, doesn't know--

But there was no way he could have followed her.

*She had just been murdered.*

The Gamayun tutts, chirruping, and their face returns to normal. Miraslava shivers, panting, certain she just lost everything... but the creature merely stops to bend down and fix her hair. A curl had dropped into her face.

“Godob. Godob. Znafin jahi, id pašsiln jahi siurehi. Vasur abrite nit zastaneft nakinonymi.”

This time, Miraslava doesn't draw back in fear when the Gamayun kneels, wings spread and waiting for her to climb aboard their back. The song of the kingfisher pierces brightly through the afternoon, and Miraslava understands where she is. Dead. Yes, dead. But not in the Christian afterlife she had expected.

This is the afterlife of her very ancient ancestors, and as she clings to the Gamayun's slender neck, their dark, wooly hair brushing against her face, Miraslava comes to understand their strange language: to understand their prophecy. She had been offered a deal. One she doubts could have ever been found in heaven, or in hell, or be lucky enough to stumble across again.

Vampirism. The fate of those without a burial.

While crossing the barrier to the mortal world, her teeth grow, the air grows colder, and she becomes a tiny, white moth as all vampires will, fur rippling in the wind as she rides on the back of what becomes an enormous kingfisher. She understands just what the Gamayun's deal is coming to, and the price she will have to pay for a second chance at life.

Miraslava was dead.

But back on the frigid river bank, she, the moth, alights on the forehead of a corpse, and human eyes flutter open yet again. Her wound is gone. Suckled dry and healed by white butterflies.

The Gamayun is gone, too, but the chirping of kingfishers urges her on. Miraslava gathers up her cloak, and her dress, and follows the path of dark and frozen bloodstains to where she had dropped her supplies in the shock of death. She checks it—a second dress, shoes, and what sentiment she could carry with her while running away. All in strangely good condition (not what she had left it in, surely). The ring she'd been given for marriage was already fed to fish long ago. It stayed there. Good.

That, she had never wanted.

The vampire picks carefully through the snow, never leaving a print behind her on the loose and powdery ice. Earlier, she had tripped, knee deep, over the snow banks. But now she must be light as air and airy as light, she thinks, as she leaves no mark nor cast a shadow.

Following the furrows of her panicked flight is easy, even in the darkness of a new moon. Artur's steps, his thin, narrow shoes, had followed the swaying lines of her skirt; she'd left a trail like a serpent through mud. She'd asked, too many times, to be left alone. Had fled their engagements of hopes of being freed from it, to travel the world until she'd found somewhere she could rest safely. In rage, Artur hadn't bothered waiting until after the wedding to kill her.

Lying in the blooming stream of her own blood, watching him run away. Miraslava knew this would have always been their fate.

Before long his footsteps lead the vampire directly to his door. She's faster now than she remembers any human being. She sets down her bag of trinkets and cares by the stoop; a moth flies in through a crack in the window. A moth alights on the ground before his bed—she pulls away the covers, and as he wakes with a shock, plunges her hand between his ribs. She barely hears him screaming. Her hand is enveloped in warmth: dark and sticky, solid warmth, and she digs until she finds the pulsing, stuttering muscle she was looking for. His heart fits so easily in her hand. He had offered it to her once—it had been a hollow promise, and Miraslava had refused. Artur hadn't accepted that. So now, the vampire would accept his offer in another way.

She bites into the heart—pulsing, pulsing—blood gushing over her lips and down her throat; half connected to his thrashing, bleeding corpse. The vampire cuts him loose. The heart beats, beats, and impales itself on teeth like knives, fangs, as the warm tang of life trickles down her throat.

The vampire drinks until his life is hers, and her would-be murderer is dead on the floor.

When she turns away and tosses his pale, blached heart in the fireplace, dozens of white moths stream in through the window, through the chimney before she lights the fire. They drink what is left from the body, pale dots swarming him, licking up the blood spilled on bedsheets and on the floor.

The rites were fulfilled, she judged, watching that house burn to the ground with dozens of vampires beside her, white moths, some alighting in her hair and on her shoulders. Kindred spirits, she does not mind them there.

When the 'cremation' is finished, The Vampire marks it as his grave. Scatters his still-glowing ashes. And leaves.

A second dress, a pair of shoes, and whatever sentiments she can carry are slung in an embroidered quilt over her shoulder, the last of 'Miraslava' becoming the first of 'Valeryia'. Word of the deaths, of vampires, will spread, all attached to the once-human Miraslava—so that name, that being, she also leaves behind in the ashes.

Valeryia walks with new life away from the silent, moonlit farms of her hometown. The song of kingfishers follows. Encouraging her on.

## For Something

by Vanessa Renee

I keep my shoes on once I get home. The humming of my fish tank fills my ears, and it registers this will be the only normal thing about today. The piece of silver in my pant pocket dances around my nails.

As I sit down, I inspect the seams and stains of the cushion shaping to me, and I feel like a thief. This couch used to be his. In an attempt to be a good big brother, he gave it to me for my first apartment, but like the ring pressing into my thigh I can't help but feel like it should be gone with him.

He turned 25 a few days ago. I'd hoped to be presented with the real him, but after the door opened and I was greeted with his dead eyes, I returned to reality. "You didn't want to wait until people got here?" He told me to stop it, slurred he didn't know what I was talking about. Later in the night when it was just us again, he showed off his new gun with an expecting face. He said, "But don't worry, it only has one bullet," I remember I pictured the bullet inching its way through the barrel, eager to feel my brother's pain-ridden flesh. "For emergencies." I was confused when he'd gifted me his favorite piece of jewelry on his own birthday, but now I know.

I let my phone buzz. No part of me wants to hear and respond to *I'm so sorry* through a mass of glass and steel. Or whatever cell phones are made of. Some kind of glue has coated my throat and dried clear, like ice in the dead of winter that melts only to freeze back up.

My second and last encounter with the gun was when I found it on the floor just feet away from his split skull. His face without life didn't look much different from the few days before. From my slackened jeans, I pull out the hunk of metal that hugged his middle finger and slip it onto mine.

## **Beer**

by Isabella Miller

Blissed are the ignorant  
I say to myself  
For they shall  
See themselves in the mirror  
Just as they appear

The lost seldom wander just as  
Hunger pangs submit  
To coffee  
The lite kind so  
As not to spoil the  
Lunch I'll forget  
In the disposal

But it's better to miss something that was once yours  
Than to hate it

## Willow

by Emily Newsome

The weight of the pistol was heavy in her tiny hands.

She sucked in a breath, willing the air deep into her lungs. Her arms were drawn out in front of her, shaking, her gaze and sight locked on the man standing before her.

Her father was bent over her mother nearly unconscious on the floor. His hand squeezed around the fabric of her thin shirt.

*You whore! You fucking whore!*

His fists flew, painting their faces with red. Iyah felt the air around her still. She felt her fingers slide over the trigger.

There was a loud *bang*— and everything went white.

“You good, Harlow?”

Iyah jumped. “What?”

“ARE YOU GOOD?”

She shook her head to clear away the memory, staring blankly at the gun in her hands. Her target loomed before her, the dark silhouette of a faceless person. “Yeah,” she said, lowering her weapon. “I’m fine.”

Carter, the instructor, cocked an eyebrow. “You haven’t fired a single shot.”

Iyah looked left to right, realizing everyone else had finished their rounds. “Shit.”

“Yeah. Why don’t you call it a day?”

It was posed as a question, but Iyah knew it was an order. She let out a sigh, pulling out the mag and sliding on the safety. She felt Carter lean over to inspect her chamber.

“Clear,” he said. His voice echoed off the high ceiling of the range. Then he reached out his hand.

Iyah reluctantly placed the weapon into his palm. She slid off her ear protection and made her way to the door. As she passed by her fellow trainees, she couldn't help but hear their comments and know they were right.

*She'll never make it.*

*She didn't even get a single shot.*

*She just stood there frozen.*

---

“And to think you never made it as an officer.”

Iyah looked down at the dead body in front of her. She watched as the light left the man's eyes. Watched as the blood spilled from his body, pooling around him in a swirl of red and concrete. “Funny how the world works,” she said.

Ellio let out a husky laugh. “A wanna-be cop, turned criminal.”

Iyah shrugged. “This side of the law pays better.”

“That's one way to look at it,” Ellio grunted. “Ready to go?”

She nodded.

“Miko will clean this up.”

“Cool,” Iyah said. “Where to next.”

“Boss wants you undercover.”

“Undercover?” she asked. “Where?”

Ellio smiled. “You're going to love it.”

The bell above the door to the storefront chimed.

It'd been three months of this. Of waiting behind this grungy counter, of dealing with these shitty, entitled people— of waiting, waiting, and more waiting for a guy who'd clearly been given a heads-up to quit his job as a sales customer in the hopes of evading payment of the money he owed. A guy who would never show. Which she supposed she should be happy about. For once, she might be able to avoid getting blood on her new shoes.

Iyah shook her head and looked across the counter, tracking the woman who walked in with heavy-lidded eyes. Her face lit up with recognition. This was the same woman who'd been coming into the shop for the past few weeks. A Saturday afternoon regular it seemed.

Iyah felt her senses diminish as she watched the woman make her way around the store. The murmur of voices around her vanishing, the annoyance and frustration at her situation forgotten. The sounds of the city outside washing away, until there was only Iyah and the woman, weaving between the racks of clothing like a dancer.

Iyah took a deep breath and let her eyes flutter closed. Even though she knew better than to dream of a personal life, knew she'd given that up long ago by choosing to live as a criminal, she couldn't help but wonder what it'd be like to feel the woman's smooth, dark skin beneath her own. Despite giving up her soul and free-will to Ellio and the Boss, she found herself unable to fight the butterfly sensation racing through her stomach.

“Miss?”

Iyah opened her eyes and the woman reappeared across the store.

“Hello!” a man said, waving his hands in front of her face. “I'm ready to check out.”

Iyah pulled her attention from the woman. “One moment...” Against her better judgement, she made her way around the counter.

“I'm in a bit of a hurry.”

“I said,” Iyah flashed her eyes at the man, “one moment.”

The man backed up, surprised, while Iyah pushed past him and continued around the counter. Keeping her eyes on the woman who was now holding up a leather jacket, Iyah speed-browsed through the racks, quickly reaching out and slipping a sheer, dark green scarf from its hanger. The only perks of working at this shithole was getting to know the layout.

She knew she might regret this, but she'd been waiting for long enough.

"You should try this," Iyah said. She held up the scarf and motioned to the jacket.

The woman turned around startled, her eyes averting to Iyah's name tag that read "Lisa," then back to the scarf.

"Oh," the woman said. "Thank you, but I'm not buying this." She motioned to the jacket.

Iyah knit her brows together in confusion. "Really? It would look stunning on you... have you tried it on?"

"Well no—"

"Then how do you know you don't want it?"

The woman looked at Iyah, a question shimmering in her eyes. "I—"

"Here." Iyah moved closer and took the jacket from the woman, carefully removing it from the hanger to hold it open. The woman smiled hesitantly, then turned around, sliding her arms through each sleeve.

Iyah surveyed the woman, unable to hide her smile. "Oh..." she trailed off.

"Oh?" The woman echoed, eyebrows raised.

Iyah nodded. "This jacket was *made* for you."

The woman blushed. "Please," she said, rolling her eyes, slightly embarrassed. Then the woman walked over to one of the mirrors along the wall and spun in a few slow circles. "You think I should buy it?"

Iyah met the woman's unsure, deep brown eyes. "Definitely."

The woman returned to Iyah's side and the tension between them pulled tight.

“So—” the woman was cut off.

“Hey!” The man waiting at the register yelled. “Either you do your job or send out your manager!” Annoyed, Iyah inclined her head toward the woman. “Excuse me.”

The woman nodded, breaking Iyah’s gaze and releasing a breath. “Of course. Thanks for your help,” she said. A tiny smile spread across her lips. “Lisa.”

Iyah looked back over her shoulder and held the gaze of the woman in the jacket. “I go by Iyah. My middle name.”

“I’m Willow,” she said. “And I think I might be ready to check out too.”

“You don’t want to speak to my manager?”

Willow shook her head and shrugged. “Not at the moment.”

Iyah smiled, knowing she’d been right to take a chance.

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Iyah kept her features cool as she waited. The restaurant was quiet, the lighting low. Candles burned in the center of each table and the soft clatter of silverware on plates, clinking glasses, and voices, echoed softly around the space. She darted her gaze back and forth between the empty seat across from her and the perfectly placed table setting.

“Are you ready to order, or still waiting?” the waiter asked, for the third time in the last ten minutes.

“*Still* waiting,” Iyah said.

The waiter nodded his head cautiously. “I understand Miss. It’s just required of me to give you a quick reminder,” he swallowed, “your reservation is only for an hour and a half—”

“Noted,” Iyah said, as the waiter headed off to his next table. She could feel her mood dying and knew now how clearly this had been a mistake. She had been cast aside her entire life. The crazy girl who murdered her father, the one you stayed away from if you were smart.

Iyah returned to checking her phone and listening in on the couple behind her, deciding to give it a few more minutes before she left.

“Sorry I’m late!”

Iyah looked up, relief flooding through her. Glancing quickly at the time on her phone, she feigned indifference, smiled and said, “No need to be sorry.”

Willow threw herself into the seat across from her, slightly out of breath. When Willow took off her jacket off and placed it behind her seat, Iyah looked her over. She wore a sheer blouse with an intricate, golden-sequenced tank underneath that dazzled in the candlelight, casting a bronze glow across her skin.

“There was a last-minute patient brought in right as I was clocking out. You know, it’s like everything’s an emergency or something.” She rolled her eyes playfully. “Then I had to run home and change.”

Iyah shrugged her shoulders. “It happens, seriously. Don’t worry about it.”

Willow smiled, her eyes connecting with Iyah’s. “Thanks for waiting.”

Iyah nodded. “You work in a hospital?”

“Yeah. I’m an ER nurse.”

Iyah could feel Willow’s dark eyes on her and she tried not to blush. This was so unlike her. “You save lives. Impressive,” Iyah joked.

“Please, enough with the flattery!” Willow laughed. “First it was the jacket, and now this.”

“Sorry, I’ll try to be more negative and degrading in the future.”

Willow laughed again. “So, where’s all this over-priced food at?”

Iyah felt the corners of her face twitching into an awkward smile, like smiling was something she had forgotten how to do, as she signaled to a waiter passing by.

“Ready to order?”

“Yes,” Iyah said. “I believe we are.”

They stumbled through the door to Iyah's apartment, a little too much Chardonnay running through their veins. Iyah found herself unused to the tingling sensation of this much wine. She had surprised even herself tonight by choosing to relinquish control for just a little while. Slipping off her coats and heels, and leaving them scattered along the entryway, Iyah led Willow into the living room.

"Shit!" Willow said. She looked around Iyah's luxurious studio apartment in drunken wonder. "What the hell do you do to afford this place?"

Iyah slid her arms around Willow's waist and up under her shirt, pushing her against the wall. "You could say I freelance here and there." Roaming her cool fingers across Willow's hot, bare torso, their lips met. The tension from dinner mixed with the wine, finally bubbling over.

"Iyah," Willow said, breathless.

Iyah kissed her harder, silencing her. She wrapped a hand around Willow's thigh, pulling it up around her waist. Willow's hand on her shoulder slid down her back, burning like imprints on her skin.

Gently, she brushed a finger under Willow's jaw.

Willow arched her body into Iyah's. Iyah answered with her own.

They moved to the couch.

Iyah trailed her fingers down Willow's neck, her arms, her back. She stared into the deep pool that was Willow's soft, taffy-colored eyes and let her water wash over her.

When they finished, they lay on the couch together as one. Willow was asleep beside her, her body pressed against Iyah's. Iyah lay awake, the anxiety of what had just occurred springing to life. How good it felt being with Willow scared her, knowing how much it would hurt when it had to be over. She watched Willow's body rise and fall, listening to the slow and steady rhythm of Willow's breathing, until sleep finally took her.

The next morning, sunlight shined in through the large windows of Iyah's apartment, splattering their entangled bodies in a soft, iridescent glow.

Iyah stirred, her neck screaming in protest. As she sat up, massaging her stiff muscles and blinking the sleep from her eyes, images of the night before flashed through her mind. Bending down, she placed a gentle kiss on Willow's forehead. "Morning," she whispered.

Willow cracked open her eyes. "My back," she groaned.

Iyah laughed. "The bed was two feet away, yet we chose to sleep on this tiny-ass couch."

Willow nodded in agreement. "It might look expensive, but it's uncomfortable as shit."

Iyah peeled herself away from Willow, showing passed the tinge of regret as the warmth from her body faded. "I'll make coffee."

"Yes." Willow stood up, stretching and looking around for her clothes.

Iyah couldn't help the tingle in her chest, the love blooming there like blood spilling out from a gunshot wound.

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Through the bedroom, on the left." Iyah listened from the kitchen to Willow's feet as they padded across the floor. Then she set about grinding the beans, pouring them into the French press, and letting the boiling water steep. A few minutes later, the bathroom door reopened. "That was fast," Iyah said. "Do you want cream or—"

Willow burst from the bedroom. "What are these?"

Iyah stared at what she held in her hand. A handful of photographs.

"What *the fuck* are these?" Willow asked again, shaking the photos in her hands, tears welling in her eyes. "Who are you?" Something else flashed in her eyes. Fear? Betrayal? Iyah set down the coffee mugs, her eyes calculating.

"I can explain."

"Then explain!"

"I— it's for work. I have to take them for work."

“Taking photos of brutally murdered people for work is one thing, maybe. A big maybe. But keeping them? In the drawer of your vanity?” Willow stepped back, her breathing ragged. “What exactly *is* your line of work Iyah?”

Iyah ran a panicked hand through her hair. This was bad. Ellio had made it clear what would happen to Iyah and anyone close to her if she broke the rules. If she let someone in.

“These are pictures of *dead bodies*...” Willow shook her head. Then dropped the photos and made for the door.

“Wait!” Iyah strode over, grabbing her arm. “I’m a detective.”

“Sure you are,” Willow said, her eyes turning frantic. “My dad was a detective. You, with your apartment and money for that restaurant... you are something else.” She tried to yank her arm from Iyah’s grasp, to grab her coat, her shoes, her phone... the door.

“Stop!” Iyah begged. “Please, just wait! I can explain everything, it’s not what you think—”

“Get off me!” Willow ripped away, stumbling for the door. “I’m not ending up in one of those photos!”

“I would never hurt you,” Iyah said, releasing Willow. “But you can’t leave like this, you can’t tell the police.”

“That’s the first thing I’m doing!” Willow ran toward the door.

Iyah couldn’t think straight. There was no good ending for either of them, if Willow called the police or turned her in...

The realization of the situation hit Iyah in that moment. As Willow was running to the door, Iyah knew what she would have to do, and it felt like a knife twisting in her stomach. Her instinct was taking over. The same instinct that had told her to shoot her father. The same instinct that had told her to be a killer, to do what she had to do to survive when she got kicked out of the police academy.

She felt as if her body wasn’t her own as she raced for Willow. She knocked the phone from Willow’s hand and pulled her back, away from the door. She grunted, against Willow’s thrashing.

“What are you doing? Let go of me!”

Iyah was vaguely aware of the tears streaming down her face.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me, so let go of me!”

If only she’d let Willow go. If only she hadn’t been selfish, and never went over to her in the store. “If you stop fighting me, I’ll let you go.” Iyah’s voice rang in her ears, on an accord of its own.

Willow fought harder. “Help! Someone please!”

Iyah felt her muscles straining against Willow. “Please, just stop!”

Willow sagged against Iyah in momentary defeat and Iyah released her hold slightly. They slid down to the floor.

“You can’t tell the police. The people I’m working for will—”

Iyah gasped in surprise as Willow ripped free of her grasp. Knocking her back, Willow raced to the kitchen. Iyah pinned her behind the kitchen island, watching as she frantically rummaged through the drawers and pulled out a knife.

Iyah wanted to scream. She had nothing.

“Back up!”

Iyah backed up.

“Let me go or I’ll kill you!” Willow held the knife in front of her with shaking hands. “Do you know what it’s like to feel the life drain out of someone?”

“I will do it! If you don’t let me go, I swear I’ll do it,” Willow said.

Iyah rushed her, trapped between what she wanted and what she could never have. In the same moment Willow ran forward, knife outstretched. She thrust it forward, screaming as her hand connected with Iyah’s body.

Iyah gasped. She glanced down at the knife plunged in her stomach and the breath rushed out of her. Black dots spread across her vision and she grasped for the counter to keep from falling. She felt for the

knife in the invading darkness. Gritting her teeth, she yanked it from her stomach, vaguely aware of Willow screaming, of her pounding feet running toward the door.

Dread filled Iyah's stomach. If she survived this, she would be punished. Killed probably, and painfully. Deep down she knew. She would be better off *not* surviving this. Her time had come, her sins were finally laying claim to her soul.

When the world around Iyah faded away she let it. Her mind wandered back to the night before. She could swear she felt the warmth of Willow's body pressed up against hers. She could swear they were lying together in a field of silk sheets, surrounded by the warm afternoon sun. There were no sounds of sirens and gunshots, only the soft chattering of birds chirping their early-morning song, in a place where her hands were clean.

Where her heart that had never known love, finally could.

# The Stench

by Brianna Thomas

Oozing with need he took a step forward  
His hands shook and his heart raced  
Grasping the wall nearest him  
He held on for support

His body rejected the air he desperately needed  
The music from his heart  
Was entirely too loud  
His stomach convulsed

No matter how much he tried to  
Push his breakfast back down  
The images in his mind  
Persuaded just the opposite

Reaching for the closest bin  
He unleashed his pain  
Chunks flew and acidic water sprayed  
From his mouth

Upon finishing he used his faded shirt  
To wipe off remains  
Embarrassed by his actions  
He hid the bin in an empty room beside him

As he shut the door behind him  
He shuffled in his pockets for some sort of mint  
Something to dilute the foul odor  
Coming from his mouth

Sighing with relief  
He found an old piece of candy  
Pieces of lint and what looked like cat hair  
Were on different parts of it

Looking around he quickly unraveled it  
Popping it into his mouth  
He let the fruity candy  
Restore order  
As his tongue rested on  
The small hairs attached

He used his tongue to detach them  
Spitting out the particles in the air  
Once he felt it was all gone he  
Made his way toward the exit

This was the third time  
It had happened this week  
He had high hopes  
That his efforts had not gone to waste

It was as if fate wanted him to experience pain  
When he had walked into the hospital room  
He expected Albert to still be breathing  
To be the pervert asshole he always was

Instead he found him purple and cold  
He had a rotten smell to him  
It was faint but it was there

He had never understood how he could smell death

How the aura could seep into his pores

Render him weak

A contagious disease that only affected him

And to think he really liked Albert

Anger suddenly consumed him

His long hours

His volunteer efforts

Grasping his head with his hands he squeezed

His heart ached for the relief

He just felt useless

His body hummed with need

Primal aggression was taking over

He needed to chill

He rushed toward the back alley

Digging in his ripped jeans

He pulled out his temporary relief

Lighting the cig

He took in three large gulps of air

And instead of releasing

He held on to it

Hearing his heartbeat fade as the smoke

Clouded his mind

He slowly let his lungs deflate

He felt himself calm

That was too close  
Way too close

A vibration in his pocket startled him  
Looking at his pager he sighed with annoyance  
He needed to finish the cig  
But he wasn't going to rush it

Instead of dishing it to the side  
He placed his back against the rigid brick wall  
Sliding his down ever so slowly  
Until he felt the gravel beneath him

Looking down the alley he noticed the trash that surrounded him  
He noticed the stench immediately  
But this smell calmed him  
Weirdly enough

On the ground was a massive pile of other cigs  
Probably left behind by other coworkers of his  
For some reason this made him feel better  
He was not alone in the battle to preserve life

A sudden bang startled him A woman rushed out  
She ran over to the side of the dumpster  
Gurgling sounds echoed  
A brief silence  
And then he heard it

The sound of the woman's regurgitation  
Brought a smile onto his face  
Standing up he walked over to her  
As she was wiping her mouth

With the edge of her shirt  
Pulling out his box of cigs  
He handed one to her  
Reaching in his back pocket he pulled out the lighter

She didn't say a word  
Just accepted his gift  
Closing her eyes she breathed in  
He saw peace return to her body

He understood  
He was not the only one  
Affected by the stench

# Tangerine

by Mia Newman

## ***Cast List***

Clementine: a 17-year-old w/ blue hair

Melvin: a 75-year-old man

Clementine's Mom: a middle-aged woman

## ***Scene 1***

*The play begins early morning in a dimly lit alleyway of downtown Rochester. A young woman is perched on top of a crate with a sign that says, "Will eat for food," resting against her leg. Across from her sitting yoga-style on a blanket is a disheveled old man who is also holding a sign that says, "Hungry. Homeless. Too ugly to prostitute." They are in deep conversation.*

Clementine: She's been gone for so long.

Melvin: She'll be back. She's a cat. They're independent. Just because you dyed her tail blue doesn't mean she's yours.

Clementine: I know that but what if she was attacked?

Melvin: Your generation's a bunch of pansies, always worried about things that don't concern you, you with your iPhones and your running water. Yanno what I had to play with when I was your age? A shotgun! They sent me off to war! Your generation couldn't win a war if the other team was blind and dismembered.

Clementine: Your generation didn't win a war Mel, you went and harassed a bunch of innocent people for a few years and then had to leave because you were losing.

Melvin: Yeah, whatever, the cat's fine.

*Melvin gets up and starts searching the ground for cigarette butts.*

Clementine: Her name is Tangerine.

Melvin: That cat probably has 20 different names with 20 different people. It lives on the streets, it's not your personal pet.

Clementine: You're an angry old man, Mel.

Melvin: I know what I am. That's how I survive. You think you could do what I do?

Clementine: What? Crack? No thank you.

Melvin: No, not crack. Do you know what the meaning of life is?

Clementine: Obviously not.

Melvin: Live life like you're going to die. But while you're doing that, try not to die.

Clementine: That is so contradictory, Mel, you tell me to go home every day.

Melvin: You left home because your parents found out you're a dyke. That's poor planning. You're making things more complicated than they have to be.

Clementine: What about you? You must have family somewhere.

Melvin: I do, but those bridges are all burned. You still have a chance. Don't give up on that.

### ***Scene 2***

*Clementine is walking down the street shaking a container of cat treats.*

Clementine: Tangerine! Meow-meow? Meow-me meow-mers!

*Clementine stops and notices a missing poster of herself. Clementine rips down the sign and keeps walking while looking at it.*

### ***Scene 3***

*Clementine walks up behind Melvin who is meditating on the sidewalk with a poster that says "HELP" in front of him.*

Clementine: My mom's been putting up posters of me all over town.

*Clementine hands the signs to Melvin.*

Clementine: It's been like four months, and she just now decides to do this? She didn't even use a recent picture. No one would be able to tell this is me, it was taken two years ago before I dyed my hair...

Melvin: Ah yes, the infamous Christmas picture.

Clementine: This was the day before everything went downhill.

Melvin: This is your chance to go back. She probably misses you. Why else would she put up the signs?

Clementine: How about you go back for me.

Melvin: Do you think they'd notice?

Clementine: No.

*Melvin gets up and starts imitating Clementine's walk.*

Melvin: My name is Clementine, and I like to run around collecting flowers and wishing my parents loved me, look at my blue hair, and purposely ripped pants.

*Clementine rolls her eyes and leans back on the wall.*

Melvin: Yanno who you remind me of?

Clementine: Who?

Melvin: My sister, she ran away from home when we were kids too.

Clementine: Why'd she run away?

Melvin: Our father was strict. He had rules for everything. The man wouldn't even let us brush our teeth in peace, sixty seconds for each side, top and bottom.

Clementine: Since when do you brush your teeth?

*Melvin ignores her.*

Melvin: She came back after a couple of weeks, though, for good, until she was 18. She made herself a home in Boston, and she never looked back.

Clementine: That's not a very convincing way of trying to trick me into going back home.

Melvin: It's not a trick. I'm just saying you'll find somewhere when you're ready, but until then, wouldn't you prefer to sleep in an actual bed?

Clementine: I could never go back. First of all, what about Tangerine? I can't abandon her. Second of all, what are you going to do without my company?

Melvin: Get some peace and quiet once in a while. Look, Clem, I don't want this life for you, I say go back and finish school. You have your whole life to do whatever you want, suck it up for a couple more years.

Clementine: I would rather stay where I am than go back to that house, Mel. You don't understand.

Melvin: You know what I do understand? The cold, you haven't been homeless in the winter, it's nothing like the summer when your fingertips start turning blue, and you find your cat frozen to death on the sidewalk. Don't come crying to me because I warned you. If you don't understand the privilege of a warm house, I can't force it on you.

*Clementine thinks this over.*

Clementine: Tangerine would never freeze, she's too street wise... You actually think they miss me?

Melvin: They'd be crazy if they didn't.

#### ***Scene 4***

*Melvin is alone on the sidewalk watching a YouTube video on how to breakdance off of Clementine's phone until he notices a woman taking down the same poster that Clementine showed him yesterday.*

Melvin: Hey you!

Clementine's Mom: I don't have anything for you.

Melvin: Clearly. What are you doing taking down pictures of missing kids?

*Clementine's Mom stops and turns towards Melvin.* Clementine's Mom: She isn't missing, she ran away.

*Melvin takes a step closer.*

Clementine's Mom: Don't come any closer.

*Clementine's Mom holds the posters out in front of her like a weapon.*

*Melvin puts his hands up in submission and backs away.* Melvin: Woah there lady, I was just saying that I know the kid.

Clementine's Mom: You know her?

Melvin: She's been around, she hangs out around the LGBT center mostly, but sometimes she'll come around here and hang out with us "geezers" as she's dubbed us. She's a sweet kid, smart too. How do you know her?

Clementine's Mom: Oh. I'm her mother.

Melvin: Yeah, I assumed.

*Clementine's Mom smiles sadly and sighs.*

Clementine's Mom: She was my little wild child, I could never get her to sit down for more than 10 minutes.

*Melvin shakes his head and smiles too.*

Melvin: Annoying, isn't it? I know you probably miss her and—

Clementine's Mom: I don't. I don't miss her.

Melvin: What?

Clementine's Mom: I love her, but I can't miss her at this point. I've done everything I can do to help her try and cure her affliction. I don't want her corrupting my other children, and I don't want her in my house.

Melvin: Why put up the signs at all then?

Clementine's Mom: My church group made them for me and is putting them up, they don't know why she left home, and I don't intend for them to find out. Ever. I will pray for her safety.

*Melvin stands there stunned as Clementine's mother hurries away.*

### **Scene 5**

*Melvin is sitting on a park bench; Clementine joins him.*

Clementine: I think you're right, Mel, I think I'm going to go home.

Melvin: What and give up? You don't want to go back to a place that doesn't accept you. Maybe you should just stay on the streets and figure things out from there.

Clementine: No. Mel, I'm being serious. I don't think I could survive the winter if I lived on the streets. I'm just going to go home.

Melvin: What about Tangerine? She'll be lost without you!

Clementine: Mel, you're acting weird.

*Melvin gets up and starts pacing.*

Melvin: Okay, listen, I met your mother earlier today, and we got to talking about you. Listen, kid. They're not worth it.

Clementine: What did she say?

Melvin: She said, well, first of all, she is a very rude woman. I don't know how you came from all that.

Clementine: Did she say that she missed me?

Melvin: No, but you don't need her to miss you.

Clementine: Well, what did she say?

Melvin: She said... that she doesn't want you to go back.

Clementine: Like... ever?

*Melvin rubs the back of his neck and turns away.*

Melvin: I'm sorry, Clem.

*Clementine nods her head and wipes her tears away.*

Clementine: It's okay, Mel.

Melvin: No, it's not.

Clementine: I don't know what I'm going to do.

Melvin: Me either kid.

### ***Scene 6***

*Melvin is sitting in an alleyway on a blanket. Clementine comes around the corner and sits next to him.*

Clementine: Look, I got us donuts.

Melvin: Did you get those from the dumpster?

Clementine: They were in a bag. Trust me, they're still good.

Melvin: I have a surprise for you.

*Melvin takes out Clementine's phone and pulls up a picture.*

Clementine: Tangerine! Oh...

*Clementine pulls the phone towards herself.*

Melvin: I found her near the deli. It took me hours to stuff her in my jacket. I didn't get very far though. She clawed her way out.

Clementine: I don't think she's meant to be a stray cat.

Melvin: Yeah, well, I've got a few scratches inside my belly button that prove otherwise.

*Clementine stares down at the screen.*

Clementine: Is this why you've had my phone all day? To bring back evidence that Tangerine is alive?

Melvin: Not exactly... I reached out to my sister.

Clementine: In Boston? Really? Why?

Melvin: I figured we have a lot of catching up to do. She's been trying to get me to come and stay with her for years. She doesn't understand this is where I like to be. I'm a bit like Tangerine, you can't wrestle me into a container without getting a few scratches.

*Melvin smiles and looks at Clementine.*

Melvin: She wants you to come and stay with her.

Clementine: You're joking.

Melvin: No, I'm serious. She's a real cool lady.

Clementine: I don't trust your definition of cool.

Melvin: She's an art critic, you like to graffiti. She has a cat, you think you have a cat. You guys will get along.

Clementine: Does she go to church?

Melvin: Only for the refreshments.

Clementine: Really... She would want me there? Are you sure?

Melvin: More than sure. I'm positive.

Clementine: What happens if she changes her mind? Boston gets pretty cold in the winter.

Melvin: When she's got her mind made up there's no going back. You're not going to be able to leave even if you want to.

*Clementine beams.*

Melvin: I'll even come to visit you from time to time.

*Clementine's smile drops.*

Clementine: You're not coming with us?

Melvin: No kid, I'm better off here. Trust me. But listen. I'm gonna get one of those razor phone things, okay? And we can talk every day if you want.

*Clementine silently cries, and they hug.*

Melvin: Jesus Christ, my sister will have to hose you down before you get in her house you smell so bad.

Clementine: I smell bad? Mel, you take a bath once a year in a public lake. I can practically peel the grime off you.

Melvin: You know what? I should have called my sister sooner. I can't wait to get rid of you.

*Clementine laughs and wraps Melvin in another hug.*

Clementine: I'm going to miss you, okay?

*Melvin hugs her back.*

Melvin: I'll miss you too.

**END**

# Run Through the Forest

by Carli Lo Cigno

Walking around the park, she looked at the trees. It was fall. The colors of red, yellow, and orange were scattered all around. She remembered as a child how they would rake the same leaves and jump in them.

\*\*\*

When she was a child, Luanne had looked at him. He had always made her laugh. His contagious bright smile, the kindness in his chocolate-brown eyes. Running around the forest, they chased each other. The swishing of the trees in the wind, the sunlight shining through.

“You’ll never catch me!” Luanne said.

“You bet I will!” he cried, his laugh peeking through his voice.

They ran around the woods for hours. She felt joy, as if everything around her had faded and all that mattered was being in that moment.

\*\*\*

She could almost hear the crunchiness of the leaves, the crackle they would make when throwing them back and forth with each other. It brought her a sense of pain but at the same time, relief. She knew that every time she visited this same spot she would remember him. Continuing along her path she saw a food truck. This was the one he always insisted they ate together.

This spot is where she told him how she felt about him. It started off with them laughing when they got their tacos. She thought it was funny how he only ordered them with chunky, hard brown meat, how he would leave out the spicy red sauce and chewy cheese that sent her mouth watering.

Luanne looked into his eyes and told him she liked him, that she had liked him more than a friend for a long time. At first he had a confused expression on his face and she could not comprehend why. She thought he had felt the same way. Her cheeks felt hot, burning. She stood from the table. Feeling flushed, she ran away, not knowing if she would ever see him again.

Luanne noticed the table was still the same color. Red and blue, the paint still looked new. The chairs had chipped slightly but continued to hold from the time that had passed. When she left the park, it was dark. On her way back, the sadness lingered. She should have never told him.

Glancing up she noticed a shadow in the distance. She would recognize him anywhere.

Something inside her caused her heart to skip a beat. Should she walk over there and confront him? It was too soon. She turned away hoping he had not seen her. She felt still, numb. Her shame had gotten the best of her.

## Le Fantôme

by Reatha

*My hands move across the keys in front of me, Ludovico Einaudi's experience escaping from beneath my fingertips and filling the empty space of the room around me. The smooth coolness of the keys beneath my fingertips feels second nature as they find the keys of each note. I resist the urge to meet the pace of every note, slowing down the song, adjusting the meaning, until the song emanating from the piano beneath me is one of sorrow, of urgency. Tragedy. I hear nothing else; I am nothing else. The hollowness of my chest seems to expand, trapping the depths of my gut in its grasp as I lose myself. A warm hand grasps the naked back of my shoulder. Breathing warmth into the cooled skin with the contact. Then the hand becomes a forearm wrapped from shoulder to shoulder until her chin is resting in the nook between my shoulder and neck, and her head is peeking over, and emerald green eyes are peering in my own. My hands find the pace of the piece once more.*

~\*~

“There. She's entering the premises.” I turn my attention to camera four as I watch the small figure emerge atop the wall. I nearly blanch in relief and a quick look around the room tells me I'm not alone in that.

Four months of preparations for an operation known only to the people in this room, that had been betting on one thing in order to have a chance of paying off in the slightest, her showing up. If not for the moon peaking over the brim of the wall at that moment, I don't know, that we'd have spotted her at all. She slinks over the edge, and just like that she's one with darkness once more. Blending in with the shadows of the night. The swing of the door opening in the corner of camera seven is the only proof of her presence.

“le fantôme” says Inspector Laurent beside me.

I agree as I follow her through the cameras, somewhat ashamed of my own admiration. She lives up to the name. “The target is in the northwest corridor heading straight for the northern entrance of the inner building.” Jones speaks into her ear piece, to the team in the field.

~\*~

*Her laugh is a soft huff as she leans over her drink, pulling the glass to her lips to take the final swig of the gin resting at the bottom.*

*“So, music? If you weren’t a cop? That’s the route you would have went?” She asks toying with the golden pendant resting against her chest, which blended well with the tawny, gold hues of her own skin. She raises her hand toward the bartender at the other end.*

*“You know I always wished someone would be asking me that question the other way around one day.” A small laugh escapes as I take another small sip from the glass.*

*“It might be for the best. If I’m being honest, I don’t know if a Luke Cross symphony would attract me.” I snort, as the bartender sets the refilled drinks in front of us. The truth in the statement had struck me once before. The urge to mention one of the stage names I had considered tempts me.*

*“What about your parents? What’s your relationship like with them?”*

*It takes me a moment to even hear the question as I stare at the curl that had sprang free and rested at the side of her head just out of her line of sight.*

*“I never knew my mother, she died when I was just a baby, my father died when I was a teenager.” The words came out on autopilot, a rehearsed answer I gave to most who asked but I could see the way it sobered her up. The shifts in her body movement as the playfulness drifted away.*

*“My parents died when I was young too.”*

*The brief silence between us is palpable. The shift in mood is slow but steady. It felt like we were only seconds away from an awkward cough and a ‘wow. Look at the time.’ I had to say something. Anything.*

*I pick my glass up from the table and raise it slightly.*

*“To childhood trauma?” I ask.*

*A low laugh escapes her as she raises her glass to clink mine.*

The guard turns down the tunnel, and not a second later she’s rounding the corner. Keeping her head angled carefully away from the cameras as she expertly navigates the corridors before her. Slinking into grooves and shadows to avoid passing patrols, deliberation filtering every movement as she climbs the stairs to the inner building of the gallery.

On camera thirteen though, the guard hasn’t started to move to the next post.

“Why hasn’t he moved? We told him switch posts exactly two minutes from your signal.” I ask.

Her small frame raises slowly to peek over the lip of the window in the door, and darts back down swiftly.

“Merde.”

“Fuck.”

“Shit.”

The guard jerks into action, turning down the hall, and heading toward his next post, and the room is silent, save for the humming emanating from the servers in the back of the room. She seems to be waiting as well, and after a few moments pass she raises her head once more, taking the smallest peek over into the hall beyond the door.

The exhale I let loose seems to rid the weight of the world from my shoulders as she opens the door just wide enough to slide her body through, and dashes for the opposite end of the hall, just as planned.

~\*~

*“What do you mean of course it does?” she states incredulous, as her emerald green eyes lock onto mine. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”*

*“He’s a criminal, he breaks into houses, and he steals—”*

*“He steals?” she asked mounting disbelief.*

*“He steals, and he has a weird focus on children, in fact he only employs childlike workers.”*

*“Woah, woah, woah”*

*“Operating an aircraft without a proper license—”*

*“It’s a sled!” she argues, a breath of a laugh escaping.*

*“If I ever catch some obese old man, climbing out of my chimney, I’m shooting his ass, no questions asked.”*

*She throws her head back, as a horrible cackle of a laugh breaks free. I watch the way her forehead crinkles, and her eyes shut as the laugh turns soundless and she leans onto my arm for support. I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips as I snuggle her laughing form into me and take the remote from her hands.*

She rounds the corner deftly, hidden by the shadows once more until she reaches the foyer, and she emerges from them and makes a beeline for the lioness perched on the beam towards the front of the room.

~\*~

*“If you could leave, just up and go without hurting anyone, would you?” the question comes from the figure nestled into my side.*

*The morning sky was absent of the sun, instead small drips of rain had begun to drizzle onto the floor to ceiling windows making up three fourths of the rectangular room, leaving small trails of water teeming on down the panes of glass, overlooking the city of New York.*

*I look down and find her eyes already trained on me.*

*“Yes.” I answer honestly.*

*“Who would you hurt?” The hand tugging at the curls in her hair and releasing it to watch the coil snap back into place pauses at this question.*

*“The people in this city who need me.”*

*“There’ll always be another detective for the people in this city”*

*“Well, yeah but that’s—”*

*“Who would you hurt?”*

*“My father.”*

*This time she turns to me fully, propping herself up on her elbow. I know I have her full attention as I continue.*

*“He was a cop like me. He died working a case. Sometimes it feels like this job links us, maybe that’s why I never gave my music a real chance. I think if I ever gave this up, I would be giving him up in some ways.”*

*“But that couldn’t be further from the truth.”*

*“Phae, you didn’t know him. You can’t speak for what he would want for me.”*

*“I know you, and I know that if he raised you, he’d want you to live for yourself.”*

*“Well, he’s dead so it’s not exactly like we can ask him” I deadpan, untangling our limbs.*

*“I wasn’t—” she’s cut off by the vibrating of my phone on the nightstand. I pick up the phone, and see the text from Jones. A case.*

*“Work. I gotta go.” I say even though I’m already out of bed and pulling on the pants I had tossed on the floor last night.*

*“Well wait a second—” A quick kiss cuts her off, before I’m turning toward the doorway of her bedroom. “Luke. Lukas.” I hear her shuffling around, ready to follow me out, and I hasten my pace, reaching the front door and closing it behind me before she can catch up.*

I brace my weight against the back of the chair in front of me as I lean towards camera two a bit closer. Her hand reaches into the mouth of the statue, for some kind of contraband she had seemingly placed, but something was different.

The subtlest of changes in her body language, her demeanor. Practiced deliberation, and as she pulled her hand free of the mouth and shifted her body towards the neighboring hall, her face is in plain view. Everything covered except for a sliver of space for her eyes, and if I hadn’t known any better, I would have sworn she was looking right at me.

But she keeps moving, rounding the last corner before the door to the room with the ‘treasure’. We each turn our attention to camera nine, ready to track her movements but seconds go by and nothing.

“Where is she?” says Jones beside me.

I frantically search the screen of camera nine. Keeping my eyes glued to the shadows in the ground, waiting for her shape to pass through, waiting for some sliver of movement to prove we hadn’t all just hallucinated the past five minutes of tracking her through the building.

Something. Anything.

“She knows.” says Inspector Laurent.

~\*~

*“I don’t understand, just make me understand.” I say following her from the bedroom to the kitchen as she carries her small bag filled with the few things she had started to leave over here. “Baby, please.”*

*“No!” she whispers turning on her heels. Her eyes glimmer with unshed tears. “You don’t get to do that.” One of the tears brim over and fall onto her cheek.*

*“You don’t get to act like you don’t know why Luke.” I reach up to wipe away the stray tear, and when she jerks away the pang in my chest grows tighter, traveling up to form a knot in my throat.*

*“Phae—” she holds up her hand cutting me off.*

*“I can’t. I can’t compete.”*

*“I can change. I—”*

*“Then change. Change for you, change for the next woman”*

*“I don’t want—”*

*“I’m sorry”*

*“So that’s it? You’re just gonna give up? After everything?”*

*“Someone has to.”*

“The target has disappeared, I repeat the target has disappeared, I want a sentry on every exit, and a patrol down every hall she does not get out this building.” says Jones through the ear piece, but nothing happens.

“Something’s wrong. Communications are down, they can’t hear us.” I say looking at screen as the lack of reaction proves my thoughts

“There’s four routes out from the treasure room, but I think we can vote how she got in out.” says Laurent as he makes a run for the door. “I’ll take to south exit”

“I’ll take the east.” says Jones, following behind him a jog.

I turn and make a full sprint to the western exit on the opposite side of the building, the farthest exit.

~\*~

*I prop my hands on the door in front of me as I struggle to catch my breath. Of course, the elevator would go down, and of course she would live on the 38<sup>th</sup> floor.*

*“Phae—” I struggle out between breaths as I pound on her door. “Please talk to me. I’m sorry. I know I always put the job before you. I know and I’m so sorry.”*

*“I tried to give you space, I know that’s what you wanted, and I know I’m being selfish but I need to see you.” I feel my breaths getting longer and the pounding in my chest a bit more bearable. “I was just gonna call you. I just wanted to talk but the phone number was disconnected.” I lean my head against the door.*

*“Phae, I know you’re in there, please.” I twist the handle surprised when it turns under my hand, and I walk into the apartment. The apartment that had been so intricately designed; modern furniture contrasted by the Victorian era decor that she’d taken such pride in.*

*Empty.*

*I sink to my knees.*

I had nearly completely convinced myself it was pointless. The mad man dash to the opposite side of the gallery, when I see her. Moving above me, the cover of darkness not as adequate in person as it is through the screen of a camera.

She was much farther ahead, but I could guess where she was heading and while she took the route that offered her the most cover, above, I took the fastest one, and made it there before her. Hiding in behind the thick marble beam. She moved with rehearsed fluidity, intent riddling her movements until she lands soundlessly back on the ground, only a hallway separating her from the west exit.

“NYPD. Freeze.” I say, pulling my gun from my holster and taking off the safety. I watch her frame stiffen. “Hands in the air.”

Her hands raise halfway until her palms are facing up and her gloved fingers splay in the air.

“Turn around slowly, and keep your hands up.”

She does and emerald green eyes meet my own.

~\*~

*“Detective Lukas Cross?” a voice asks, pulling my attention from the pile of paperwork sitting before me. The thick French accent warping the pronunciation into something softer, elegant almost.*

*“Speaking.” I state tucking the phone into the nook of my shoulder and trapping it with my ear.*

*“I have some information that may be of interest to you,” says the man on the other end. “It’s about a thief I’ve been on the trail of for the past five years now.” I lean back in my chair, dropping the pen on the table. “I have reason to believe this woman is behind the Firavanti heist that occurred two days ago.”*

*“Go on,” I state, pulling out my notepad, and grabbing my pen once more.*

*“Phayruh?” I ask. My voice just above a whisper.*

~\*~

*“Operation Bolenia?” I repeat sifting through the contents of the yellow dossier handed to all the individuals crowded around the table.*

*“From what I have gathered throughout the years of being on her trail Le Fantôme, seems to be a moral criminal, or at least in her eyes.” says Inspector Laurent as he stands at the head of the table.*

*“A criminal with a conscious” I snort at the irony.*

*“What I mean by this, is that she doesn’t steal from the needy but she doesn’t give back to them either. She gravitates towards pieces of work with a history of a theft of its own.” he speaks fumbling for the right words to translate his meaning. “Take a look at her heist in Florence in 2016. The Azzurro Amulet.”*

*I flip the pages of the folder back to 2016 and find it. The Azzurro Amulet. The amulet had a custody battle for a while between the museum who had placed it on display, and soon up for bids, and the Azzurro Family, whom the media, and many others deemed the rightful owners as it was originally gifted to their great grandmother. After a long, public, drawn out, legal case it was eventually given to the museum, who used the media coverage garnered for the amulet, the attention, and curiosity, to drive crowds to see the piece that had garnered such a fuss over the months.*

*After milking that dry it was then announced that the piece would be up for grabs at a once in a lifetime auction. Until the day of the auction when the piece, guarded by two separate security teams, in a building with 24-hour surveillance, locked in an airtight, triple lock, weight sensitive vault, was stolen right from under their noses. This was the case that made her an internationally wanted criminal, and initially placed her at number seven on Interpol's most wanted list.*

*“I thought—” I stumble out of the sentence, struggling to find the words. “I looked for you Phae— I—”*

*~\*~*

*“You want to create a fake treasure?” I repeat. “And fabricate a narrative about this piece that you believe would interest her?”*

*“Oui” he says a smile tugging at his lips*

*“You wanna trap the phantom.” I state looking at the board containing the plan in front of me. It would take months. Months of careful planning, and a very neatly crafted lie. A delicate operation that could unravel with one wrong move.*

*“Operation Bolenia” I state leaning against the table as I take it all in. “Let’s begin”*

*“You’re the Phantom?” I manage to get out, remembering my purpose here. “The Ghost? That’s you?”*

*“Yes.”*

I feel my knees go weak. I think of the business trips, the extravagance, the fascination with history, the flexibility, I gulp.

“You’re a criminal.” I state. “A thief?” she takes a few steps toward me, slow, indecisive almost.

“Yes.” she says, still moving closer. It doesn’t make sense “A liar.”

“Yes.” she stands in front of me now, her hand moving toward the turtleneck pulled up over her nose, and revealing the lower portion of her face. The face that’s haunted my dreams for the past seven months.

“I’m a cop. You know I’m a cop so why would you—”

“Luke, I never planned on that. I never planned on seeing you after we walked away from the bar that night. I never planned on falling for you.”

What do I say? What is there to say?

“Come with me.” I reel back like I’d been slapped. “I came here for you, Luke.”

“Do you really think that’s gonna work on me right now?” I say as she places a hand on the gun aimed at her face now and nudges it down until it dangles, useless at my side. “I’m not an idiot, Phayruh”

“I’m not an idiot, Luke.” she spits back. “Bolenia? Really?”

“You’re just trying to—”

“I’m not, Luke. I swear. Do you really think you would’ve beaten me here if I didn’t want you to?” she asks waving her arms around the little area. “It was too easy. You guys underestimated me.”

“You’re a criminal, Phayruh, you were better off staying gone.” I holster my gun and reach for the cuffs dangling from my side. “I’m taking you in”

“Luke, I’ve never hurt anyone. Yeah, I’m a thief, but a thief among thieves can hardly be considered a thief at all.” I grab her arm and she lets me, putting up no resistance. “I’ll stop. I came here to show you the truth, to show you me in the only way I knew how, and to ask you to pick me anyway.”

“I would never pick you.”

“Luke.” her voice breaks.

“I don’t even know you.”

“You’re a coward. You’re never gonna change. You’re never gonna chose yourself. You’re gonna live like this until you die like your father did.”

~\*~

The finale of Tchaikovsky’s 6th symphony blares from the record on the stand about ten feet away. I sit on the couch, the empty bottle of bourbon resting at my feet as I read the article that had made its way across the screen of my phone for the third time from a different news outlet, each saying the same thing differently.

“Le Fantôme, upon landing in France to stand trial for the crimes she has been accused of including the infamous Azzurro heist five years ago, was pronounced dead just hours ago after the car transporting her was hijacked by armed, masked men, and driven off a bridge, sources say this was a potential mob hit linked to a longstanding grudge between the two.”

I let the phone slip through my fingers and land on the floor with a thwack as I pull free the picture for the tenth time that night. A picture she’d slipped in my pocket when I turned her over. A photo, of me visibly disgruntled, standing next to Santa Claus, while she stood between us linking our arms through hers, her eyes wide and her smile wider.

## Summer's Calling

by A'Vyanna Billingslea

The vision of an owl can be projected by a 360-field vision, scoped in like binoculars. It wasn't until I put on that hard suede leather like glove. Needed to guard my hand from the talons, clipping a strip onto the band already attached to their leg the strip allowed me to have control over the movement. Ozzy, a barn owl hit by a car and left blind in one eye and neurologically damage. He was wild he was docile. Perched perfectly on my arm the feeling was indescribable. I looked up as Ozzy extended his wings that spanned out 2 feet wide. It was that moment my eyes glisten with wonder, I couldn't help but think. Even with one eye, did Ozzy see far beyond the expectation I would have during that summer.

My typical worrisome parents concerned about me being six hours away because it was the furthest, I had ever been from them. Insisted on following behind me the way there though I felt a surge of confidence I agreed. I understood their concerned, the only girl of four kids. Though they raised me to be independent they wanted me close. I called it independence with a security string, something I knew my whole life. None the less my mind was made up and I was hellbent on going, the drive was breathtaking. The range of colors between the mountains, blurred in the background of a dull grey peaked. Against the blue sky marbled with soft foamy clouds, mixed with the greenery of the trees. The trees had lives of their own, standing taller than most towers I had ever seen. They danced with each breath of the wind swaying back and forth. The lakes rippled the reflection of the sky as the sunlight reflected over it. The drive made me appreciate the beauty of this earth, our home. The wingspan of the birds in flight casted shadows on the road. The wingspan of a great gray owl can reach up to 4 feet wide. Rarely seen in the summer, majestically marvelous just like the drive.

Upon arrival Wendy the founder greeted us, her voice held so much power I wasn't prepared for it at the time, but I grew to understand it. Overstimulated, my own field vision has expanded through the narrow tunnel it once was. I turned to my parents once again, peering through their conflicted expressions embracing them with a hug that solidified my decision. The tires rolled against the pavement, eyes glued to the rear-view mirror. I glanced away in fear they would turn around and change their minds. Instead, I looked at the once bright blue sky that gleamed against the sun's rays mellow into a crimson dusk waning into nightfall.

Morning came and the sky had returned shining differently than it had before, it must have been the trees. I was assigned tours, since I'd never given tours it felt like an honor. I sat at the bench waiting for people to come, notebook in hand. I was ready to my own research, giving myself a sense of familiarity. I stopped at every cage, writing the name, species, and 10 facts about each of them. Birds of prey was the most abundant, eagles, hawks, falcons, osprey, blue herons, and so many owls. There were more birds than expected, but also mammals such as foxes, coyotes, porcupines, possums, bobcats, and

wolves. I stopped in front of the great horned owls, their massive yellow eyes stared outward as the small feathers easily mistaken for ears acted as antennas. I knew they didn't have ears, instead it was a hole in their skull set diagonally across from each. Just standing at the cage, he heard my heartbeat and that captivated me. As much as I enjoyed gazing into those wide set eyes, the cage behind it had some commotion. Following the sound of the of what I thought flapping wings caught in the gaze of Ozzy.

I remembered Wendy mentioning the option to choose an animal to work with for environmental educational seminars. I gazed back into the face one massive black eye looking everywhere but nowhere all at once. While the other hollowed out the shape of where an eye used to be cover with feathers. I wanted him to be my project, I couldn't explain the pulling line that drew me into this bird. Training started soon after, daily hours of just sitting in the cage hoping, waiting, debating. Night falls brought out the most activity as owls are nocturnal creatures. Footsteps crunching against pebbles, twigs, and dirt on the path to the cage. I stood at the outside of the locked cage, clicking my tongue to the roof of my mouth in hopes he would fly over. I never worked in the past, he just gazed. Cocking his head to the side expressionless. Clicking it enticed him patting my legs, springing from his perch in the back he flew to the closest branch near me. Wide eyed and gapped mouth, disbelief sprinted internally. Wasted frustration prevailed under the moon lit night, though Ozzy stared in the blank face of time. He was here, in front of me, on his own.

Rescue, Rehabilitate, and Release. It was the slogan verbally thrown around, but I felt that we kept more animals then released. I educated myself to educate other and I could feel the rush building. I was creating excitement, learning hands on , diving into a unknown world of visionary dreams. My days off consisted of operations. Running this facility, their purpose and mission. I was immersed, I made friends with the other interns and created a sense of fellowship. The tours seemed to be second nature. I increased my interactions with the animals now handling the foxes and playing tug a war with the coyotes. In between interacting with the other animals, I made time for OZ every day. I started adding to the enrichment development of their homes as well as the educational tours I gave.

Bewildered eyes filled with shock from adults and children alike, caught my attention. With every enlightened moment it dawned on me, I was teaching. The chemicals in my brained exploded at the euphoric thought of passing knowledge to another as they soaked it in. They were curious about the things I wanted them to know. Processing the information and digesting it for application when they

leave. The heat from summer air warmed my skinned but clashed with the nerve ending textualizing my skinned. Bliss engulfed me, closing my eyes I inflated my lungs with my surrounding smiling to myself. Walking over, I grabbed that suede leather glove clipping Ozzy's strap in and hitched him up. Taking a moment, I looked at him the one eye blinking. Raising him up and turning my hand, he extended his wings, the greyish brown lightweight feathers bounced with the reflection. His wings felt like an extension of my own.

# Masthead

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