Eggshells
Creative Writing Capstone
Spring 2020
“We were talking about sneakers but it was poetry even though I didn’t know it was poetry. I just remembered how good it sounded and how the words were as beautiful as the sneakers.”

- Matthew Lippman
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Contributors

Lucy Behr is a fiction writer from Rochester, New York. She is completing a degree in creative writing from Monroe Community College. She is interested in writing as a vehicle to explore the uncanny, and how we interact with language. Every word is an attempt to translate and make understood our rich and lonesome inner lives.

Monica Bryant is a lifelong writer and storyteller. Particularly interested in genre fiction, family dramas, and identity, Bryant pours out her heart into every letter. She has an English Associates and is currently working on a Creative Writing Associates. She would love to one day be a librarian.

Marcus Ferguson is twenty-five and was born and raised in Rochester, New York. Marcus aspires to become a future film director/screenwriter. He enjoys listening to new music, spending time with family/friends, sports, and video games. Writing has always been the forefront of Marcus’s passions, as he plans on using his talent to help other creatives feel comfortable to express themselves and their work.

Abby Grasta is a writer and culinary graduate from Rochester, New York. In 2019 and 2020, she received MCC’s Rice Award for her two nonfiction pieces. She will be transferring to the University at Buffalo in the fall. She hopes, one day, to work at a publication where she can travel the world meeting interesting people eating interesting food.

Scott Knapp has trouble talking about himself without a practiced measure of misdirection. But when he speaks from the heart, everything he has begins and ends with his high school sweetheart, their enduring love, their children, and grandchildren. Scott has recently launched a website devoted to his latest novel at songsonrepeat.org.

Bryan Michielsen is a creative writing student at Monroe Community College. He mainly writes fiction but enjoys writing in other forms too. He is the Treasurer and Literary Editor for Cabbages & Kings, an award-winning literary magazine. Bryan’s work appears in Cabbages & Kings, Sink Hollow, and at bryanmichielsen.com.

Casey Sherman, age twenty, is an upcoming playwright in the Rochester community. His plays, loosely inspired by events in his own life, capture what he believes reflects society today. He plans on graduating from Monroe Community College this month, and attending SUNY Geneseo in the fall.

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I dried my roses, placed them in vases where I knew they’d collect dust. Knowing who sent them, I couldn’t bring myself to throw them out. I thought about freezing them, but what’s the point? My memory of them wilted long before the flowers anyway. I tried to prick my finger on the old thorn, but the brittle thing only broke. Fitting, broken roses for a broken heart. These dried roses will live forever, unlike our love. Too many roses, too many fallen petals.

(L to R: Scott Knapp, Bryan Michielsen, Casey Sherman, Abby Grasta, Lucy Behr, Marcus Ferguson, Monica Bryant, and Professor Maria Brandt)

I snuck out when the sun set and followed my sister to the circus. I was eager to arrive before dawn. It would be the first circus I’d ever been to. It was pouring, and there were giant puddles where the elephants walked. My shoe came off in the mud. Before I could stop, my shoeless foot met the ground and slid in the mud, and I went down in a split. The mud stained my shirt and pants, but I kept marching on. I was soaked in the sounds of the circus, bells and whistles and stomping feet filled my head.
The Woman Who Peeks

Jess pushed the slats apart and peered out the window. The police were outside her neighbors’ house for the second time this week, keeping her awake, with their lights shining through the blinds and dancing along the walls of her bedroom. She wasn’t upset by the commotion, simply amused.

A man and woman sat in the grass while two officers stood in front of them, one with hands on his hips and the other holding his flashlight, illuminating their faces.

Jess stood still with her ear against the window, trying to decipher what they all were saying. The man started yelling and Jess turned her head to see what was happening. He pushed past one officer and stood in front of the Crown Victoria with his boxers around his ankles. He showered the windshield. When he was an arm’s length from being seized, he pulled his bottoms up to his thighs and wobble-jogged around the car, urine still leaking from hispisser.

The woman crossed her arms and looked up, noticing Jess had been watching. Palms sweaty, Jess backed away from the window and waited a minute, taking long, calculated breaths. She continued her watch from the bathroom.

One officer restrained the man and put him in the vehicle while the other officer spoke to the woman. Within a minute, the woman made eye contact with Jess again. This time she pointed, and the second policeman looked towards the bathroom window.

Jess ran back to her bedroom and closed the blinds. Her teeth ground together, and her jaw tensed. She heard them knocking on her front door.

“We just want to ask you some questions,” the officers said. The door muffled their voices.

She couldn’t think of why they’d want to speak to her. It’s not like there’s a law against looking out your window. Mrs. Freeman across the street paid no mind. She’d smile and wave. Mr. Thompson from down the street walked his dog past Jess’ house every morning, lifting his cap in salutation. Jess would nod back at him, and he would continue walking. Around seven every night, Jamie undressed and indulged himself, but he didn’t know Jess was watching. She refrained from photographing him most of the time.

She paced back and forth. The knocking became pounding. She slipped into her sheets and tried her best to fall asleep.

“If you don’t answer, we’ll be back with a warrant.”

Jess stared at the camera on her desk, and she waited.

By Bryan Michielsen
The Blood Rite

(Content warning: blood, gore, self harm, abuse)

Desiree could not tear her eyes from the maid’s ankle. The first time she had seen the maid, she was crawling on her belly in the hallway through a pool of blood pouring from her neck. She had clawed her fingertips between the grit of the tile floor, trying to pull herself out of the doorway to Desiree’s father’s master bedroom. Too weak to yell for help, she had outstretched a shaky arm towards Desiree. She had cried in pain, her eyes begging for mercy. Desiree stood frozen as Dante, her father, outstretched his hand from the doorway, grabbed the maid’s ankle, and dragged her back through the doorway, shutting the door behind them.

That was a year ago. Now, the child watched the maid’s same ankle like a wolf catching sight of a lone dwarf rabbit. As the maid, who’s name Desiree was never taught, dusted the antiques placed across the fireplace mantle, a lit cigarette dangling from her ruby red lips, Desiree sat on the rug in the center of the sitting room. At eight years old, she had never tasted fresh blood. The cups of reheated blood bags sustained her physically, but they never delivered a true feeling of satisfaction. As the maid noticed Desiree watching her intensely, Desiree heard the blood in her veins begin to pump faster. The maid was nervous. She had every reason to be.

Moments later, Desiree shot across the rug, her teeth piercing deeply into her Achilles tendon, snapping it in half with the sharpness of her fangs. Desiree’s jaw clamped tightly around the maid’s ankle, causing blood to spurt from the puncture with an explosive squelch. As the maid screamed in pain, her cigarette falling to the carpet, Dante ran to the scene. Before attempting to pry Desiree from her ankle, Dante waved a hand before the maid’s face, causing a milky white to cloud her eyes. The screaming stopped. Desiree unlatched from her ankle, a mouthful of crimson streaming down her cheeks and throat. The taste made her gag, a new feeling for the bloodthirsty little girl. After snuffing out the cigarette with the heel of his loafer, Dante pulled his daughter up into his arms, and instructed the maid to seek his wife for medical attention. She obeyed, a thick trail of blood following her every other step as she silently retreated.

Dante took Desiree upstairs and placed her into the empty bathtub, fully clothed. He then pulled down the shower-head, and began pelting Desiree with the stream, attempting to wash the blood from her body. Desiree squealed and squirmed, hissing at her father.

“Why did that lady’s blood taste bad!?” she said as she was being hosed down.

Dante turned the water off and set the shower-head back.

“Because she is my Blood Serf,” he yelled, anger still etched in his face, “She serves only me, her blood is mine. Now think about the damage you caused, you filthy mongrel.”

Before Desiree could question him further, he stormed from the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. She heard the lock click. All the doors in the manor locked from the outside, all except Dante’s master bedroom. Soaking wet, shivering from cold, and alone, a rush of shame overtook Desiree. Tears began streaking down her cheeks as she sat down in the wet bottom of the tub, hugging her knees, waiting to be released.

Desiree has been hunting on her own for a long time now. She had resided in this city for a few years, and found it to be a perfect hunting ground. High crime rate, low rate of cases solved, and cops who couldn’t give a rats ass about the corpses they’d find once or twice a week with
mysterious holes in their neck. The police suspected some newfangled drug that was easy to OD on. Desiree was free here.

It was a typical night for her, the night she found what she was looking for. First, she strolled through the hard wood door of a bar she’s never been inside of. She knew the layout, as she had already spent a night outside watching patrons from the sky, flying around the building, marking out a sonar map of the place. Once inside, she pulled the hood down off her curls, and took a booth corner seat, her dark lensed spectacles masking her eyes like a shield.

Dante had taught Desiree this next part, and it was the only thing she was grateful to have inherited from him; the checklist. There are rules to picking meals, ways to contain any arousing suspicion. Number one, leave anyone with a wedding ring alone, they’ll have at least one person looking for them. Number two, analyze clothing carefully. If they have stains, beat up shoes, worn down hand-me-downs, unkempt facial hair, this often means two things; they’re not rich, and they have no one to impress. Number three, watch their eyes. If they avoid eye contact with others, they’re insecure and easily swayed. Desiree found all this and more in a medium built man with a mesh cap, a greasy complexion, and boots with electrical tape around the sole. She had spied on him for almost an hour, going over the checks in her mind three times through, before approaching him. Other than the bartender, she was the first of the night to do so.

This was the easy part. Flash a grin, Desiree, control yourself. Feign interest. Pump them with alcohol, but not too much at once, or they’ll taste bitter. Desiree liked them drunk. It’s a special kind of intoxication, taking someone else’s high straight from their veins. She knew the man had told her his name, but she wasn’t really listening. Another hour passed, and Desiree had to support him out through the front door. He was as giddy as can be, convinced he had managed to take home a breathy Suicide Girl. Desiree pushed the wooden door open, and turned to the left, steering the man down the side alley of the bar. Dante had warned her to keep her meals quick and clean, make it look accidental. Desiree began to hold the man closer as she pushed his back against the wall of the bar, safely hidden from street view by the overfilled dumpster.

She leaned into his neck, inhaling the scent. Whiskey, tobacco, cheap aftershave. She hissed softly before biting hard on his neck, her canines puncturing deep gashes into his artery. The man tried to scream and failed, his voice wilting to silence. Desiree swallowed deep gulps of his thick, warm blood. Her head began to pound as she felt the alcohol hitting her. She moaned against the man’s neck. She released him with a gasp once she had her fill, dropping his pale corpse to the ground.

Desiree breathed in the night air, sucking in all her lungs could hold, desperate to feel their expansion. On the exhale she noticed a cloud of smoke billow out above her head. She turned to the apartment building on the other side of the alley. Three floors up, a thin man with shoulder length brown hair, thick brows, and a slight hunch settled between his shoulder blades blew smoke out from his cracked window. From below, she was able to hone in her eyesight through the dark into his room. He sat at a desk stationed at the window, his cigarette in one hand and a pencil in the other.

He was hunched over a book, eyes set firmly on the contents as he absent mindedly took drags. Desiree remained in the alleyway, standing, watching. The hollowness of the man’s cheeks intrigued her. His chain smoking went on for a while before the man was forced to toss an empty cigarette pack to the floor. He put his head in his hands, shaking, before shoving the book off the table, standing from the desk, and walking away from where she could see him.
She left then, but returned each night thereafter. Instead of the alleyway, where an investigation was sure to ensue, Desiree took to the rooftop of the bar, a perfect angle for her to keep an eye on her new subject. From the rooftop, she could see all the way into his studio apartment, with a sonar trip or two helping her to map out the nooks and crannies. Night after night, she watched his routine. Tuesday’s and Thursday’s he had night classes, and the rest of the week days were spent between classes and janitorial duty at the bar she surveyed him from. He arrives home exhausted, lighting up a cigarette while attempting to study or complete assignments. He’d frequently work himself into a tizzy, crying over his books and papers. He’d hit his head with his hands, tug on his hair, kick the coffee table. Then, he’d resign to the couch. An hour or two of television, sometimes coinciding with dinner. Some nights he went without food. Most nights, between 11pm and midnight, he would joylessly masturbate to a sitcom, and he wouldn’t even close the curtains. He received no phone calls, all his mail was bills and spam, and no one else ever entered the apartment. Every night out on that rooftop watching him drove Desiree absolutely wild. He’s desperate, she thought, He’s broken. He’s perfect.

Tonight, she walks the moonlit campus of the community college, forcing her heeled boots to click loudly on the concrete. She had been waiting for him to exit his night class, and tonight she’d initiate contact. Out of the lecture hall with a few other tired humans walked the man Desiree had been waiting for. Desiree began walking one of the paths to meet him where the walkways merged. He was too busy locking his eyes with the ground to notice her B-line for him, before the two ran into each other, causing his books to topple from his arms to the ground.

“Oh!” Desiree said, “I’m so sorry! Here, let me help you.”

She knelt on the ground with him, picking up books, while the man shuffled papers and pushed them back into folders with a nervous quickness.

“I-I should’ve looked where I was going,” he said, before looking to Desiree, finally meeting her eyes.

Her dark ginger hair curled softly around her face, framing her pale, chiseled cheeks, a splash of freckles decorating her button nose. Her blue eyes seemed to light up in the dark. She smiled at him.

“What’s your name?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Jack,” he said

“I’m Desiree,” she said.

Jack stood with her now, clutching the books to his chest, simply in awe of the woman smiling invitingly at him.

“Do you… you don’t happen to- maybe… wanna get a coffee?” he asked her.

Desiree kept her smile from enveloping into a more sinister grin.

“I’d love nothing more,” she said.

Desiree walked with Jack to his apartment, not far from the small community college.

“I just gotta drop my books,” he said, when they reached the door. His eyes had yet to meet with hers again. “Do you smoke?” he asked, while unlocking the door.

“Yes,” she lied.
“I’ll grab a pack, then,” he said, quickly pushing into the apartment.

Desiree stood in the doorway, watching him. She could enter, if she desired, but she preferred watching him from outside the apartment. Entering would break a part of the fantasy for her. He was her animal, this is his cage.

After dropping the books on his couch and scooping a pack of cigarettes out of the freezer, he came back out, shutting the door behind him.

“Thanks for coming with me,” he said, “Do you… still want to get that coffee?”

“How about a drink?” she said.

“Oh,” he said with hesitation, “Well, okay. If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” she said, before grabbing his clammy hand and leading him out of the apartment and towards the next door bar.

Wait, I-I don’t think we should go here,” he said, “I, um… Well, someone died in the side alley not that long ago. Could be dangerous”

“I’m not one to be scared,” she said, heading inside.

Jack followed.

The bar was certainly hit with the news of the death of the trucker in the alleyway. While the numbers here were never large, there was only a single regular sitting at the bar. Neither Jack nor the bartender acknowledged each other.

“I should tell you,” he said to Desiree as they sat in a booth, “I work here. I’m the janitor. I hope that doesn’t make you think less of me.” His eyes were locked down on his clasped, shaking hands resting on the table.

“I could never,” she said, her persistent grin digging into her cheeks. She hadn’t smiled so genuinely in a very long time. “I was going to ask what you did for work, anyway.”

“I’m glad,” he said, a small smile revealing yellowed teeth.

Jack was not a traditionally handsome man. Had he any more meat on his bones, perhaps his body and face would have become more attractive, but it wasn’t his looks that drew Desiree. It was his weakness.

“So, um,” he began nervously, looking anywhere on Desiree’s face and body but her eyes, “What do you do?”

“I help people,” she told him.

“Like a nurse?” he asked.

“Like an angel,” she said.

He breathed a laugh, pulling a cigarette out of the pack in his pocket.

“What do you think I need an angel?” he asked, then lighting his cigarette.

“I think you need a God,” she said.

Jack’s demeanor shifted.
“Oh, so you’re a missionary.”
“Oh, fuck no,” she said with a laugh, “Never set foot in a church. Not that kind of God.”
“Then, what kind of God?” he asked, offering her a cigarette.
Desiree took the cigarette from between his fingers, and set it on her bottom lip, her red lipstick imprinting on the butt. She snapped her fingers on the end of it, igniting it. Jack jumped in response.
“Woah,” he said, “How’d you do that?”
“Trick my father taught me,” she said, taking a drag. She had smoked before, but she could take it or leave it. Smoking Jack’s brand, however, was like inhaling home.
Jack watched her, waiting for her to speak, utterly lost for words.
“My father was a cruel man,” she told him, “He didn’t want children. He wanted power, control. Didn’t take long for him to figure out that being a father meant he had full control over his kin. The less power we had, the happier he was.”
“I’m sorry,” Jack said, “Sounds just like my mother.”
Desiree watched his face carefully, sucking in on her cigarette. His frown deepened into his face at the mention of his mother.
“Tell me about her,” she said.
“She died,” he said, “A year ago. Lung cancer. She said she was fine with dying as long as they didn’t make her quit smoking.”
“She left the way she wanted to, then” Desiree told him, “That’s a good thing.”
“I guess,” he said, holding silence for a few moments, “She always told me that I was her perfect little boy. Right up until she bit the big one.”
Desiree’s smile faded. The sadness in Jack’s face was genuine, he radiated his sadness like a nuclear plant.
“You need someone,” she said.
“Like your God?”
“I have no God,” she said.
“Then I don’t know what you’re getting at.”
“Your God died a year ago,” she said, “And I ran away from mine. I know what makes a God, and you know how to serve one.”
Jack looked up to meet her eyes for the second time.
“W-What are you saying?”
“Worship me, Jack,” she said, her hand shooting across the table faster than light, her nails already dug into the back of his hand, “I will take care of you. I will feed you, I will clothe you, I will take you away from this aimless misery.”
Jack’s jaw dropped.
“Worship you…?”

“Fully and completely,” she said, “What do you say?”

“I… Worship you how?”

Desiree grinned once more.

“A god possesses the souls of their subjects,” she told him, “And I want yours, Jack. Give it to me, and you can be mine forever.”

She leaned further over the table, her cleavage exaggerating with this movement.

“How do I do it?” Jack asked, setting his other hand on top of her, gripping her hand like he’d float away if he let go.

“It’s a special ritual,” she said, “Called The Blood Rite.”

Jack nodded.

“I’m in.”

The warehouse was long abandoned, nothing left but walls, dirt, and rot. Desiree felt powerful there, meaning it was the perfect place to enact the Rite. It had only taken a few hours to gather the supplies, as they were minimal. An athame, five black candles, and the two of them. That’s all it took.

Desiree prepared while Jack stood outside, chain smoking like he got his oxygen supply came from the pack. As the smell of nicotine wafted through the night air, satiating the ritual space through the broken windows, Desiree grinned. She felt at home again, only this time, the power was all hers.

Desiree had learned the Rite from Dante after her mother died. To replace his wife, he had found a morphine addict from the state above the one where the manor was located. He kept her high, she agreed to whatever he said. Dante had instructed Desiree to watch, which she had done with mixed feelings. Regardless, she had no choice but to watch. Curiosity and disgust wormed through her belly as Dante had completed the ritual before her eyes. She had been shocked at how quickly the screaming had ended.

Kicking a few small rocks and crumpled beer cans from her working area, Desiree withdrew the athame from her pocket. She dragged the heel of her boot in a large circle, before tearing the blade of the athame down her left forearm. She hissed in pain as the black liquid dripped from her veins. She held her arm with her free hand, guiding the blood to drip along the circle, coating it in her blood like a demonic moat. Once she had finished, she wiped her fingers through the blood still pouring from her arm, and began drawing the runes within the circle at five points within. After her blood was no longer necessary, she licked her tongue up her forearm, sealing the wound as if it had never been there. While she had felt a bit woozy from the blood loss, she would soon have more than enough to make up for it. Within each rune, she set a candle, lighting them each with a snap of her fingers.

Now ready, she called for Jack to come inside. He fumbled his pack back into his pocket before entering, surprise etching through his face as he caught sight of the ritual space.

“All you have to do is lie down in the center,” Desiree said.
Jack looked to her for reassurance. Grinning ear to ear, her dark lips framing her sharp canines, Desiree gave him a single nod. That was enough. He approached the circle, taking a hesitant step over the black circle, and sat down in the center.

“Lie down,” she said.

Jack slowly moved onto his back, allowing his knees to be bent towards the air. Desiree stepped over, and began pushing his legs down gently, running her hands down his thighs. This made Jack jump, becoming frozen by the tenseness of his muscles. Desiree laughed in her throat softly at his reaction. Jack began taking in deep breathes, the candlelight all that illuminated his rising and falling chest. Desiree set Jack’s arms away from his side, palms facing upwards.

“Now what?” he asked, as she stood and walked around the circle towards where his head laid.

“Two things,” she said, stepping back into the circle and kneeling beside him, “First, I feed. Second, you feed.”

“I feed?”

“Hush,” she said, gently taking Jack’s head in her hands, turning it to face away from her, “This will only take a moment.”

As her fangs pierced his skin, Jack yelped in pain. Trying to bear it, he began breathing heavy and fast. To keep him from squirming, Desiree moved her hands to his wrists, shifting to sit on his belly, drinking heavily from his jugular. Thick, dark, smoky blood flowed down his gullet, causing her to moan. Jack continued groaning in pain, growing weaker. Once he stopped struggling, Desiree removed herself from his neck, and resumed sitting on his torso, causing Jack’s breathing to grow more ragged. She licked her lips clean, and pulled the athame back out from her pocket.

“P-Please,” Jack begged, “Have mercy!”

A flush filled her cheeks. Desiree dragged the blade down her arm once more, opening a smaller wound, before holding it over his mouth.

“Drink or die,” she said.

Shaking, Jack allowed his mouth to open, and Desiree held her arm over him, forcing the blood to drip down his throat, causing him to gag and gargle. He dared not close his mouth. He felt like crying. Desiree was thoroughly aroused.

“There we go,” she said softly, deciding he had drunk enough. After licking her arm closed once more, she shifted her hips and began grinding down on his pelvis. “Say you want me. Say you want me to have your soul.”

“I-I want you to have my soul,” he cried out.

“I accept,” she said.

The black blood circle and runes flashed a bright, violent red. Jack began to scream, like he was burning alive from the inside.

*Good, Desiree thought, It’s working.*
As suddenly as the red light arrived, it disappeared, taking the flame of the candles with it, leaving behind nothing but dirt and burnt candles. Jack still screamed, both in pain and fear, his cheeks wet with his sobs.

“Enough!” Desiree shouted.

Jack fell absolutely silent. His breathing leveled, and his muscles relaxed. A milky white color began flooding his eyes from his pupil. He laid beneath Desiree, completely and fully hers.

By Monica Bryant
Fools Rush In

For better or worse, Jonathan Gleason had always been a thinker, especially in the months following his father’s passing. And being alone, as he was now, waiting on an oil change at his favorite mechanic’s place, did well in turning up the volume on his thoughts. He found himself remembering a particular, good-humored warning of his father’s, how he’d often said, “Never read any to-be-continued stories.”

His father used to say a lot of things, nuggets that made up so much of who he was that Jonathan’s brother had suggested the siblings place a collection of their favorites on the back page of the funeral service booklet. They were able to fit twenty, gems like:

“We’re off like a dirty shirt.” “Put a little light on the subject.”

“I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight.” “Our neighbors get all the good weather.”

How strange it is, Jonathan thought, that someone is here for so long, and then not.

He was glad his father had lived to see Obama elected. Though considerably more practical a Democrat than Jonathan, his father had come to embrace Jonathan’s hope for a transcendent presidency. But in his next thought, Jonathan wondered if maybe it was cruel to know Obama had won, but not to know what happened next. Like seeing only the first half of a movie. This was a perplexing question. If he had the choice, when would he want the television turned off?

Jonathan had taken his car to this same family-run mechanic near his home for as long as he had lived there.

The family’s father – voted “most honest mechanic” a couple years back by a regional trade publication – did the repairs with help from his adult son and a hired high-school kid, while his daughter worked the front desk and his wife handled the books in the back. It was a no-frills operation. Evidenced by the tiny three-chair waiting area with its invariable issues of People magazine, yesterday’s local newspaper, and a coffee pot that had seen better days. Jonathan had slunk himself down into one of the straight-back chairs achieving a tenuous position of comfort. Hands folded atop his stomach, eyes closed, he concentrated on the music coming from the shop radio. It was a Ricky Nelson song from 1963, the same year Jonathan was born. The tune had a hurried beat that Ricky’s vocal seemed frantic to catch up to, and its energy remained in Jonathan’s subconscious when Becky, the daughter, called over to him that his car was ready. He settled up his bill and went outside to his car. He shook hands with the owner, then raised a friendly hand to the young employee who had done the actual service. “Thank you,” Jonathan shouted to the young man across the noisy bays.

“Thank you.”

Two words, it struck him, as he took a moment to collect himself behind the wheel and to fasten his seatbelt, two words that would do just fine as a last utterance of a person’s life.

He remembered something from a college philosophy course he had taken a hundred years ago, a statement some philosopher had made on the subject of death. It went something like this:

_A person’s last thought, is what Death is... A person’s last thought, is what Death is..._

A last possible instant of consciousness that lives on in a state of
infinity – like a song on repeat. So the trick then, it seemed to Jonathan, was to have one’s best thought at hand, in reach – prepared in advance like a parachute carried in the pull cord in case of emergency spot of the brain – ready at a moment’s notice, for the most precious of all moments. The last.

That would be one fancy parachute, Jonathan mused. A tall order, for sure. But then, just like that, it came to him. Hands down, no contest: A sweaty summer-night high school party, early 1980s, tight together in an overstuffed chair in a dark corner with the cutie he was crazy about. It was either Journey’s “Lovin’, Touchin’, Squeezin’,” or the Eagle’s “Heartache Tonight,” Jonathan couldn’t be sure, but she was the one, he was sure of that, and he wasn’t wrong – after that night came high school sweetheart, girlfriend, mother of their children. It was corny but it was also the truth – that one giant Truth Jonathan hung everything else upon. It was the most magical moment of his life, and he knew now he wished it to be his parachute.

They had already been on numerous dates – varsity basketball games in crowded gymnasiums, Friday night bowling with the safety of mutual friends, a school trip to the local amusement park (where she took the initiative, slipping her arm inside his) – but it wasn’t until that night, when neither knew the party’s host very well, or many of the guests for that matter, or why they were invited, or if they even had been invited, that they found themselves together in a private corner. They sat for hours putting names and stories to strangers, not knowing they would continue to do so for the rest of their lives. That together, they would buy cars and rent apartments; purchase a home and raise children; vacation and worry about money; do laundry and rake the yard; and every night, save for a longing handful, would end their days side-by-side in the dark, safe on their life-raft mattress on a tiny planet across a forever universe.

The night grew later, the couple grew quieter, closer, braver, young hands groping, exploring new places. Eyes closed, their breathing became heavier, excited, no other people existed. Slowly, inch-by-inch, until their lips, their mouths, soft and wet and warm, found each other in an act of extended passion. A kiss for the ages… ring the bells…cue the music…it was the song from radio at the garage…Ricky Nelson had brought it home for him…

When we met

I felt my life begin

So open up your heart and let This fool rush in... “Thank you, Ricky,” Jonathan said out loud in his car, soaking in the warmth of the bright light streaming across his face through the open sunroof.

“Thank you.” There they were again, those two words.

Thank you for Ricky Nelson’s song, for high school summer nights, for honest mechanics and their families, for magic parachutes – for the love of his life…and maybe for his death.

Life is for the living. Was that one of his father’s? “Keep your head in the game, Jonathan.” That was certainly one of his father’s.

Jonathan pulled into the driveway and spotted his wife on the porch watering the hanging baskets. She turned toward him and smiled. “You look like a million bucks!” That was one of his father’s, and it was the first thing Jonathan’s father had said to his new daughter-in-law in the receiving line of the wedding reception. And that’s what Jonathan was thinking now.
She met Jonathan on the lawn, her arms tight around his waist, his arms tight around her shoulders.

“You get your oil changed?” she asked, her eyes meeting his. “Yeah,” he said, “I’m good for another three thousand miles.”

*By Scott Knapp*
**Door to Door**

*Characters:*
Issac: Age 19, Male. Blake: Age 18, Male.

*Setting:*
Issac’s and Blake’s houses. As they are on a voice call with each other, the set should be divided in half with some form of wall, with each half being a different set to represent their two individual houses.

*Scene*

*Lights flourish on Issac and Blake sitting on their respective couch*

Issac: You all set?
Blake: I think so, except for some reason my television isn’t turning on.
Issac: Do you have it on the right input?
Blake: Yes, for once. Fool me once shame on me, fool me twice, shame on me again.
Issac: Well I’m glad you learned something from last time.
Blake: Yeah yeah, moral of the story I’m dumb sometimes.
Issac: I wouldn’t say that much, you sure know a lot about what we’re playing.

*beat*

Issac: Exactly what are we doing on here again?
Blake: We have to go into that one den and defeat and capture that big monster.
Issac: What big monster? That’s the game’s gimmick, there’re alotta big monsters.
Blake: The purple one.

*Beat*

Issac: Okay but which big purple one?

*Beat*

Blake: I found it! Head over to the oasis for me so we can start please?
Issac: I’m trying, I dunno where it ...is.
Blake: It’s in the middle of the map, you really don’t know where it is?

*Iissac shows visible annoyance*

Issac: I don’t know where I am, because for some reason despite the fact that the game looks fine when its sunny the moment the game decides to spawn a sandstorm my vision just gets nuked in half.

*Pause*

Issac: Like, why would you make your products look actively worse in most Circumstances?
Blake: There you are-
Issac: Oh, what? Small world ‘eh?
They kinda exaggerated how ‘open’ this whole thing was…
Blake: Ugh, shut up-
Issac: Hey, all I’m saying is I enjoyed the older games better.
Blake: Yeah, well they’re still fine games.
*Issac shows visible annoyance*
*Pause*
Issac: Now hold up, I’m not saying the game is trash.
*Beat*
Issac: I’m just saying the Metacritic was really funny because the three-out-of-tens are true.
Blake: Just help me catch the damn thing.
Issac: Yeah, yeah, I’m on it. So what’re you doing with yours once we capture it?
Blake: Probably nothing.
Issac: Then why are we doing this?
Blake: I don’t want the purple purple monster. There’s a rare chance for it to be blue and I want the blue purple monster.
*Beat*
Issac: So like two or three more battles?
Blake: More like five thousand.
*Beat*
Issac: What? So, your plan is to go from place to place in the hopes that one of the battles is the blue purple monster?
Blake: Yeah basically.
Issac: And you do this for fun?
*Beat*
Issac: Cause to me this sounds like real life with more work.
Blake: Huh?
Issac: You go from place to place in the slim hope that something good happens but it never does.
Blake: I don’t have you in real life now do I? It’s us two against the world.
Issac: I mean you may as well, you call me everyday, Mom’s calling you her third son.
*Silence*
Issac: I dunno about you, but I play stuff to avoid life’s bullshit. Just thinking about going door to door makes me wanna get blackout drunk.
Blake: Oh yeah, being a drunkard would be so much better than hanging out with your friends, huh?

*Beat*

Blake: Like it or not, we’re together for a reason.

*Beat*

Issac: Are we though?

Blake: You’ve told me about your last day of senior year, what do you think?

Issac: I mean, besides the fact that we were all shitnosed little kids, I did that to myself.

Blake: What’d you do to make them not like you?

Issac: Nothing. What happened was I abandoned everybody for an iced coffee.

*Beat*

Issac: That was some good iced coffee by the way. Maybe I should’ve had one of those instead-

Blake: Do you talk to any of them still?

Issac: I mean, kinda. There’s a group chat but it’s been dead for a long time.

*Beat*

But even then some of the kids have mellowed out even more. One of them asked me if I needed a ride once.

Blake: I wish I could relate. Issac: Well have you tried?

*Beat*

Blake: Have I tried-

Issac: It’s a fair question. Like, take the game as an example. You bought it twice, I bought it once used. You didn’t care about the problems, I didn’t.

*Beat*

Issac: And I can assure you that once this game is older and there’s a new version you’ll be bitching about this old one like I am right now.

*Silence*

Issac: Don’t settle for less, fight for more.

Blake: Don’t settle-

Of course I’ve tried! I’m not a social butterfly like you.

*Beat*

Blake: Although how much of one are you? Considering you’re trying to ditch me.

Issac: Me not wanting to be in a call with you for every moment of every day isn’t me ditching you. Sometimes I need space.

Blake: For what?
Issac: Relaxation, talking to other friends I have online, being able to leave my house and not waste away in my off-white paradise.

*Pause*

Issac: I shouldn’t be rotting in here, and neither should you.

Blake: ...But what else would I do.

Issac: Figure it out, if you’ve got enough time to go door to door you got enough time to figure it out.

Blake: But, everybody hates me.

Issac: That’s what I thought too.

Blake: You do too, huh?

Issac: No, but sitting here isn’t healthy now is it? What benefit do I have for being here?

Blake: Being my only friend, please you can’t do this-

Issac: Oh yes I can, watch me. I dunno where I’m gonna go but It ain’t door to door.

Blake: Good, don’t come crawling back here after abandoning me like you’re gonna.

Issac: Oh? Let’s test that

*Issac hangs up the call. He stands, waiting*

Blake: Ergh, why does he have to be like this.

*Blake Calls. Issac looks at it before Exiting stage left*

Blake: C’mon! Answer!

*Lights dim on Issac’s side of the stage*

Blake: C’mon…

*Blake tries again, lights fade on Blake’s side*

By Casey Sherman
Sweet Tea

Aurora’s skinny hips lean against the bathroom sink of the grocery store. She unfolds the wax paper wrapped around her sandwich and closes her green eyes. She feels the peanut butter ooze through the space between her two front teeth, the grape jelly making her lips pucker just a little, then hears the voices of her classmates, even though it’s been three years since high-school graduation.

“Get away from me, fat ass.”

“Don’t talk to me you greasy piece of shit.” “They made fasting for people like you.”

She tosses the rest of the sandwich in the trash.

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Aurora lives with her father in the town where she grew up – between the bar and gas station. She’s been working at the grocery store since she was fifteen wearing the same red vest over her bony shoulders. Her pin-straight blonde hair has grown past her back. She hasn’t had it cut since her Mama’s car crash. Most nights before the crash, Aurora would sit with her Mama on the porch swing. Billions of tiny stars dotted the thick black curtain that was the sky. Between handfuls of Coco Puffs, Aurora would look down at the belly fat peeking out from beneath her shirt and pinch. She thought maybe that would make it go away.

Her Mama would stroke Aurora’s hair and say, “Hush, darlin’, cuddle with your Mama. God loves you just the way you are.” Then she would hand Aurora a cold glass. “Sweet tea makes everything better.”

Aurora began eating her lunch in the faculty bathroom. One day, she forgot to lock the door and her tenth-grade English teacher found her sitting on the toilet, her mouth stuffed with potato chips.

“You know Aurora, there are diets that can help you with your problem. You’re not gonna get far in life like this.”

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“Oh. My. God.” Stacy from tenth-grade History smiled and grabbed Aurora’s wrist the first time they met. “You’d be so tiny if you lost a little weight.” Stacy invited her for a sleepover, where she coated Aurora’s eyelashes with cheap mascara and lined her eyes with black.

Her room smelled like Victoria’s Secret and posters of Justin Bieber lined her walls.

On Aurora’s sixteenth birthday, Stacy came over toting a present wrapped in pink paper. Aurora tore open the box and inside was a food scale.

“Thanks, Stacy.” Aurora ran her hands over the scale’s black buttons, the digital display that would tell her how much she should eat.

That was the first day she made herself throw up. One day after class, her Mama surprised Aurora with a chocolate cake in hand. They ate it right out of the pan, so warm from the oven that the frosting melted into little pools.
But it ended like this – Aurora snuck into the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and retched brown vomit until she was dry heaving. She rinsed her mouth, sat back on the swing, and rested her head on her Mama’s lap.

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After her lunch break, Aurora stares at the waxy apples gleaming under the fluorescent lights. She feels the lump of peanut butter still going down her esophagus. A woman in her early seventies rolls her cart down the aisle, knocking over a box of Trident.

Did you find everything you needed today?” asks Aurora.

“I found more than what I needed, but don’t tell anyone.” The woman winks and points to the chocolate-chip cookies on the conveyer belt.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

The woman looks at Aurora’s nametag. “Aurora,” she says, “what a pretty name you have.” She has thick silver hair that hangs past her shoulders and big hoop earrings. Most distracting is her mouth – bright red lipstick perfectly drawn on her lips. She wears a yellow sundress and a hat with cowboy boots and matching jewelry.

Her boots click on the orange tile and the sliding doors close.

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After her shift, Aurora walks the two miles home. The hundred-year-old siding of her house on Whitman Lane used to be daffodil-yellow but has since faded.

The house has white shutters and a wraparound porch. Dozens of ferns hang on hooks and beside the door is the two-person swing noisy with rust-coated chains. In the driveway sits her busted-up yellow VW Beetle.

The front screen door slams shut as she walks through the hall. “Daddy?”

“I’m kinda busy right now.” She sees her father dialing a number on the landline, winding the cord until it looks like it’s about to break.

She walks into the bathroom, twists the shower dial left, and waits for the steam to build. She slips off her vest and jeans. Her translucent skin shows the blue and green veins running down her thighs. She swings her hair to her front and looks backwards into the mirror inspecting each vertebra.

She pinches the skin around her concaved stomach and remembers the fat that used to be there. Then, she steps into the scalding hot shower and scrubs until her skin is pink. She stares into the reflection of the shower faucet at her C-cup breasts that won’t go away no matter how much she weighs, and wills them to shrink. She inherited those from her mother.

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“Aurora, you look amazing! That food scale really works,” Stacy said.

“I’ve been going to the gym a lot too.”

Stacy knew that Aurora’s Mama’s minivan was crushed by an eighteen-wheeler on the interstate a few weeks ago. But she didn’t know that Aurora had started throwing up before the crash and barely ate since.
“That’s perfect, we should go out with the guys sometime.” Stacy smiled and tossed her shiny hair. The scent reminded Aurora of the shampoo her Mama used.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She would never eat the McDonald’s fries again, which she used to douse in honey in the passenger seat of her Mama’s minivan. She would not eat the chocolate-covered cherries at the gas station, or lick each layer of chocolate until she got to the fruit. And never would she have the sweet tea.

Her Daddy would make a big plate of fried chicken and place it on the porcelain plate with blue flowers. He never asked Aurora why she only took four bites before throwing the rest of her meal away. She didn’t even have to pretend.

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After Aurora gets out of the shower, she makes herself dinner: a cup of fat-free yogurt, fourteen blueberries, and five almonds. She doesn’t like eating with other people, so she jumps when her father walks into the kitchen and takes off his cap. Crusty dirt outlines his balding head.

“Rory, honey,” he says, “I gotta tell ya a couple things. Been thinkin’ about it a lot and I can’t keep supportin’ ya. It’s not the money. It’s that you’re a grown woman who don’t have a life of ‘er own.”

“Okay – I mean –”

“C’mon Aurora, I been tryna’ tell ya this but ya haven’t wanted to listen. What happened to takin’ online classes? I even asked my buddy a couple months ago to get ya a job at the bank, but ya didn’t even wanna try.”

“Where am I gonna live?” Aurora tilts her head up to keep her tears from falling. She bangs by accident against the kitchen table and the chandelier shakes. It reminds her of when Daddy would stomp on the floor after work and ask Mama about the brownies or Chessman cookies hiding in the cabinet. Janie, why can’t you stop it with this?

You know Rory’s gettin’ picked on at school? Those kids are meaner’n hell. This isn’t helping her make friends. Aurora would stand by the stairs holding her breath while the crystals clattered against one another.

Aurora’s father looks down at the floor, “C’mon Aurora, ya know I love ya. But Mama ain’t ‘round no more. That’s why I’m makin’ ya start your life and be an adult. Ya gotta figure this out. I gotta go to bed.”

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Not tonight. See ya tomarra.” Her father kisses her forehead and walks upstairs.

She feeds the rest of her yogurt into the disposal and listens to the grind.

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Aurora turns off the porch light and sits on the white swing, breathing in the sticky-sweet smell of August. She remembers when her father would pick her up and put her on his shoulders to pick peaches.
She can feel his soft beard tickle her leg, still hear her Mama laugh and scold him to put her down.

Aurora runs her hand along the bottom of the swing and waits for the pierce of a splinter. To feel the tiny droplets of blood grow larger until they stain the white swing red. She paints a heart with her fingertip.

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Aurora is staring at the empty moving conveyer belt the next day when she feels the vibration of her phone in her back pocket.

“Did ya figure out what you’re gonna do?” says her father. “Can we talk later? On my lunch break or something?”

“I put the house up for sale.” “But that house – that house.” “That house has bad memories.”

She hangs up the phone and spots her pot-bellied manager. “I’m taking my break early.” She grabs her brown paper bag and runs to the bathroom, then pulls out her orange. Her breathing is fast and shaky, and her face redens like the blood on the swing. She throws her orange on the ground and its juice sprays and stings her eyes. Then she stomps until her skinny leg burns.

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Aurora splashes cold water on her face. “You can do this,” she tells herself. She walks back to her register and switches on the light.

“Fancy seein’ you here beautiful!” the woman with the silver hair says. “By the way, my name’s Nan.” She smiles wide.

“Hi, Nan. Did you find everything okay?”

“Oh yes, but what I wanna know is, why so glum?” “Just family stuff.”

“That’s rough, honey.”

“My Daddy’s selling our house.” “Where do ya live?”

“The big yellow house on Whitman,” says Aurora.

“I adore that house, such a lovely porch, and those ferns,” she puts her hand on her heart.

“Yeah, that’s where I live,” Aurora says, “I don’t know what to do – I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

“It’s easier sometimes to tell the truth to strangers, honey. I can see you’re a bright girl. You certainly can do better than this place. My babies moved away but I made sure they knew that they could do anything if they wanted it bad enough.” Aurora likes the way Nan pats her hand. Her skin is tan and spotted, soft like her mother’s. Her eyes are bright blue and crinkly. It looks like she’s been laughing her whole life.

“I even moved away for a while. Lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. You wouldn’t even recognize me with all the flowers in my hair,” she laughed, “you’ve just gotta explore, honeybun.”

“Thank you, Nan. That’s really nice of you to say, but I don’t think that’s in the cards for me,” Aurora moves the conveyer belt forward and keys in the code for okra.
“I have an idea, would you like to come over? You could bring your computer and we could look at options, maybe find a little apartment for you.” Nan speaks slowly in her heavy Southern drawl and takes Aurora’s hand. “I make the best sweet tea. Sweet, but not too sweet.”

“I would like that very much,” says Aurora.

Nan opens her purse and finds a notepad. “Then it’s set. Here’s my number.” She draws a heart and clicks away.

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Aurora closes her eyes. She is back on the porch, the bench a little less rusty. She hears the ice clinking in her Mama’s old mason jar and takes a sip. It’s cold and thick and syrupy. She feels her Mama’s warm, pudgy hand, kisses it. And then she lets go.

By Abby Grasta
There is always an eerie fog about Hollow Grove. A thick, misty cloud suspended above the dark asphalt of the roads and greenery of the Earth. Wafting concurrent with the wind gives the fog its mobility. Some days, the fog looks animated. As though it can walk or is gathering a catalog of Hollow Grove and the people that live within the city’s borders. The fog never ceases to exist, yet no one ever talks about it.

“So, tell me how you feel, Minkah.”

“I guess…stuck. I feel like I won’t get outta the city. All of my scholarships, my chances to get out of Hollow Grove are gone. So, here I am. Working a minimum wage job I hate, in therapy. I feel like I’m in purgatory. I’m always feeling sad for myself.”

A sigh from Minkah cuts the silence that followed his statement. Light from the fluorescent bulbs illuminate the windowless room. The Therapist sits on one side, Minkah on the other. Each session is the same: the Therapist listens, records, reports.

“Minkah, did you hear me? We’ll have to pick up where we left off, next week. Our time is up, today.”

“How was it?”

“It was weird, today. I felt off the whole time. One minute I was talking about how I felt, I blinked, and it was time to go. I felt like I lost track of time.”

“You’ve said before that taking your pills makes your body act weird. Did you mention anything to the Therapist today? You’re like the only person in all of Hollow Grove who may be allergic to them.”

“No, I didn’t mention it. This was different, babe. I can’t explain it, but this didn’t feel like a normal session.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you feel better?” “Not really, thanks. Let’s just go home.”

“What happened to meeting up with Rod?” Kendra asks.

“Shit. I’ll text him and let him know I mixed my days up and I’m not feeling good, he’ll understand.”

That night, Minkah flushes his pills down the toilet. He picks up his phone from the bathroom counter and texts Rod back:

*Minkah*: What up bro? Completely 4got bout us getting up 2day.
Not feeling too well. Reschedule?

— SENT @ 2:32PM, SEPTEMBER 29th, 2020.

Rod: No doubt, feel better bruv.

— RECEIVED @ 2:34PM, SEPTEMBER 29th, 2020.

Minkah: Yo… I’m gonna come by your house after my appointment tmrw. Wanna talk to you about something that’s been bothering me.

— SENT @ 10:17PM, SEPTEMBER 29th, 2020.

Minkah looks at himself in the mirror and does not recognize the person he is looking at.

“Where do you want to start today, Mr. Freeman?” The Therapist asks, a brooding look from behind his thick square glasses.

“I stopped taking my pills.”

The Therapist's eyes widen, he fixes his glasses. The Therapist asks Minkah, “Why is that?”

“They don’t make me feel well. They make my head hurt and my days feel never-ending.”

“Is that so?” The Therapist takes notes as usual.

“Yeah,” Minkah says. “I feel better already if I’m being honest. Like I’m thinking clearly for the first time in years.”

“That’s good to hear. If you don’t mind excusing me for one moment, I have to step out of the room to make a call.”

“Sure, yeah.”

Minkah knows that a therapist leaving in the middle of a session is not common. In the initial contract he signed before attending sessions, it was explicitly stated therapists can only leave the room in the case of emergencies. To Minkah, nothing urgent is happening. No longer taking the pills, Minkah’s curiosity and awareness is higher than normal. So, when the Therapist gets up to exit the room, Minkah is not too far behind.

Awakening Corporation does not look as appealing inside, as it does on the outside. Minkah follows the Therapist down a long corridor, passing four doors that look like the same one Minkah’s sessions are behind. The Therapist makes a right and enters a room made of glass. In that room, there are three other people dressed exactly the same, but their faces are not visible. Trying his hardest to not be seen, Minkah hides his body against the wall and attempts to listen to their conversation.

“It seems that we may have a defect,” his Therapist says. “Meaning?” one of the others replies.

“Meaning that he stopped taking his pills. I have not come to a conclusive answer if he is defective or not, but I wanted to let someone know.”

“So, you came all the way down here to tell us something you’re unsure about?” replies one of the other Therapists.

“Well, yes, but--”
“But, nothing. You were about to give us an excuse. Go back and finish your session, then monitor the boy. You have all the tools you need, including the fog.”

“Al... Alright.”

The terror Minkah is feeling shutters throughout his entire body. He hears steps receding from the glass room and runs back toward the room where his session was being held. Moments after, the Therapist enters the room and says, “Sorry for the wait, I hope I did not take too long.”

Short of breath from running and worry, Minkah replies, “I have to go.” He brushes by the Therapist and hurtles toward the exit of Awakening Corporation. Out of breath, Minkah rips the car door open and sits in the passenger seat, Kendra is in the driver.

“You’re out a little early, everything alright?” Kendra says.

“Yeah, I know. Can you head to Rod’s house? I told him I’d come by, I want to talk to you two about something,” Minkah answers.

“Everything alright, babe?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’ll tell you everything when we get to Rod’s.”

Minkah pounds on Rod's front door, Rod answers.

“What did the door do to you Minkah? Why are you being so aggressive?” Rod laughs.

“Hurry and let us in, I have to talk to you,” Minkah says and sways by Rod to get into the house.

“Well hi to you, too. Hey Kendra, what’s up his ass today?”

Kendra shrugs and says, “I couldn’t tell you. He said he’d tell me when he got here. Guess we’ll find out in a second.”

Kendra and Rod are sitting on the couch while Minkah is pacing back and forth. Minkah knew that he would be being monitored, but to what extent is the question that plagued his mind. He was uncertain of his ability to speak freely, for if he said too much, Kendra and Rod could be in danger. He began checking windows and closing doors, before he finally said, “Let’s go to the bathroom to talk.” Kendra and Rod look at each other in bewilderment but follow Minkah into the bathroom.

“Minkah, what the fuck is going on, man? You’re sketching me out,” says Rod.

“So, I stopped taking my pills last night. Then today, I went to my session with the Therapist and told him. As soon as I told him that, he left the room. I followed him. I followed him down a couple long hallways to a room where there were other Therapists that look just like mine, like they were clones. He started telling them that he thought I was defective because I stopped taking the pills. The others told him to monitor me, using the fog and other tools.

That’s why I wanted to talk in here, because I’m not sure what they can hear or see. I don’t know what the hell is going on, but there is some real creepy shit happening in the town and we need to get to the bottom of it.”

“We?” Kendra questions.
“Yeah. I mean, don't you want to find out what’s going on?” “Of course, babe, but are you sure that’s what you saw and heard? Maybe your mind is playing tricks with you since you stopped taking the pills last night.” 
“No, no. I know what I saw. I know what I heard. You think I would make this up? I didn’t say that.” “You didn’t have to.” 
“Alright, now. Let’s relax,” Rod says. “You’re sure that you’re sure, Minkah?” 
“Rod, I’m not an idiot. I literally just told the both of you that I feel better than I have in a long time. Maybe you guys should stop taking the pills, too.”

“Yes, Minkah, maybe we should go home? So you can get some rest?” You’re all riled up and I don’t want you making decisions off of impulse,” Kendra replies. 
“No, Kendra. I’m not tired. I’m not delusional. I’m trying to tell you about a huge conspiracy that is happening under everyone’s nose and you think that I’m lying about it? I never thought I’d see this day. I’m disappointed.”

“I didn’t say you were lying, Minkah. I think you’re confused and need rest. But whatever, do what you please.” Kendra storms out of the bathroom, out of Rod’s house and to the car. 
Rod grabs Minkah by the shoulder and says, “I believe you bro, but you need to go and make things right with her. You know I’m always just a call away when you need to talk. Oh, and just for you, I’ll stop taking the pills. Maybe I’ll feel better, or figure something out. But for now, you need to worry about your relationship.”

“Yes. You’re right,” Minkah says and sighs. “Thank you, for always being a great friend. I know I flake on you and I’m not the best friend to you, but I really appreciate you.”

“Of course, bro.”

Minkah opens the passenger side door and sits in the car. 
Pausing for a moment to collect his thoughts, Minkah looks at Kendra and says, “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to put a wall between us, but it hurts me that you believe I’m saying this only because I stop taking the pills last night. You know me better than that, Kendra. I wouldn’t tell you about what I saw or heard if I wasn’t sure.”

“I know, Minkah. But, I’m still worried about you. We don’t know what effects not taking the pill is truly having on your body and mind. I just want you to be safe and healthy.”

“I am healthy. Neither of us are safe though. We need to get far away from here.”

“And go where?”

“I don’t know. Just drive as far as you can.”

In its first attempt to prevent Minkah and Kendra from traveling outside of Hollow Grove, the fog became more dense. The white cloud engulfs the car, leaving minimal visibility for Kendra to keep driving.
Kendra begs Minkah to allow her to pull over, but Minkah urges her to continue to drive. “The fog will lead them right to us, they control it, I told you that. You can’t stop,” he says. Kendra drives slow, not knowing whether she is on asphalt road or not. After about five miles, the fog
becomes less dense to the couples’ joy. But, to their horror, they realize that there was another obstacle ahead. Minkah and Kendra stare at the fifty foot cloud of fog that is in front of them. Kendra stops the car right before attempting the drive through the fog.

“I’m afraid, Minkah.”

“Just drive, babe, we can’t stop for long--”

The fog uses the wind to give a huge hit on the passenger side window, making Minkah flinch and scaring Kendra into flooring the gas pedal. She screams, which makes Minkah scream as they trek through the mystic fog to get out of Hollow Grove. There was an unbearable silence in the car for hours. The further Minkah and Kendra were away from Hollow Grove, the thinner the fog became. The green leaves hanging from the Willow trees become more visible. Behind the trees, stars glisten in the deep purple night sky.

Citizens of Hollow Grove have never experienced the beauty of the heavens due to the constant fog and cloud that engulfed it. Minkah and Kendra were in awe, admiring the tiny beams of lights that are celestial giants. There was finally a moment of calmness that they could enjoy, until they reached a roadblock. Two armed officers approached the car, one on each side.

“Road’s closed,” said the officer on Kendra’s side of the car. “What happened?” Kendra asks.

“Construction.”

“Well this is the only road leading out of Hollow Grove, what should I do?”

“Go home. Why would you be trying to leave the city?” “We just wanted to enjoy a drive, but we’ll turn around, sir.”

Minkah and Kendra arrive home, there is silence between the two until Kendra squeals after realizing there is standing in their living area. Minkah says, “How’d you get in here?” But, his question goes unanswered as two others ambush him and Kendra. They are both drugged, blindfolded, and kidnapped. Minkah knew that when the time came the Therapist would come looking for him, but he did not expect it to be so sudden and abrupt. He never had the chance to uncover the horrors that happen within the walls of Awakening Corporation. He never would have the chance to know how the pills that the inhabitants of Hollow Grove ingested controlled their levels of consciousness. He would never be able to learn about the dome that surrounds Hollow Grove, and why. But, Minkah’s awakening is the turning point that will not be wasted by Rod.

“Kendra?!” Minkah screams. He has just woken up tied down to a gurney, under florescent lights. Although he cannot see her, Minkah hears Kendra’s faint whimpers from the wheelchair she is tied down in. “Don’t worry, Kendra, I’m here baby! Everything will be fine.” Footsteps begin to approach Minkah, as the sound from the soles crashing against the linoleum tile in the facility gets closer.

“I love your confidence, Mr. Freeman,” says the Therapist. The Therapist pushes the wheelchair Kendra is in front of the gurney Minkah is in. He begins to fix Kendra’s hair, pulling it away from her face. Anything you’d like to say to your boyfriend?”

Kendra whimpers, reaches for Minkah as much as she can and whispers, “Help me.”
“How sweet.” The Therapist says, reaches into his jacket, grabs the 9mm he has holstered and fires it into Kendra’s temple. Her body falls limp in the wheelchair, and in shock Minkah gives a shrieking wail for his love. “I really hate for this to have to be this way, Mr. Freeman. But, you’re just too much of a liability. You’re the first defect the organization has seen in 35 years, we’d hate to have you spread your ideals. So, that’s why I had to get rid of your little girlfriend. But you? You are going to be studied. Day in, day out, I’m going to find out what makes Minkah Freeman the only defect.”

Speechless, all Minkah can do is sob at the site of Kendra losing her crimson life fluid to a cold tile floor. Knowing there is no longer any hope for him, Minkah thinks of Rod. His best friend that trusted his word and promised to stop taking the pills too.

Rod sits in his bathroom that night, after calling Minkah three times and receiving no answer. He grabs the pills from his medicine cabinet and flushes them down the toilet.

*By Marcus Ferguson*
August Is Over

When the last washer bows out, Myra and I are sent to stick our skinny arms under soda machines, between the bed frames of vacant rooms, and in bedside drawers beside a bible. Together, we manage two dollars and sixty-one cents. Rudy and Jonas fetch laundry baskets close to bursting. Vi starts the van.

“We’ll get those washers fixed in a jiffy,” says Ivan. He shakes the men’s hands.

“Our kids’ll run your loads to the laundromat,” Jane says, and the young mothers tap their bare feet a little faster on the blacktop.

“On our dime,” Ivan says.

1987 is a different kind of year, and even the sweet veneer of Myrtle Beach is beginning to give with the weight of it. Yes, the ferris wheel still turns, never seeming to stop. There are still as many half-eaten sticks of cotton candy in the sands as cigarette butts left by stick-thin women.

Motels see the first of it though, the cracking. Sick men wear spots on their skin and roam the shoreline like stray cats. Needles in sinks. Kids vanish from the beach. Motels collect foster children for the monthly allowances we bring. Hoards flee New York. They swarm and stay if they can stomach the sun. People are afraid.

Jonas sits shotgun, the rest of us making seats from clothes baskets in the back. Vi flicks on the air conditioning to a chorus of cheers, amplified by the walls of the van and the knowledge that this is not allowed.

Rudy draws with a finger in the dust and claps his hands to get Myra’s attention. Even deaf, he is louder than she’s ever been. I turn to the baskets and turn out each pair of pockets. Four dimes and two pennies. A lighter with a naked lady on it. Her eyes are scratched out.

In the last item - a plain pair of khakis that smell like smoke - two polaroid pictures. They are glossy and reflect my face in their shadow-filled corners.

In them, a girl. Her hair is long like mine, but brown like Myra’s. She is in a motel room. That much is clear from the twin lamps fixed to the wall between two beds, the nondescript notepad on the nightstand, the cheap blinds off to the side and what little light they let through to illuminate her. This is not one of our rooms. No, the floor is plush and green where ours is hard and brown. The bedspread is a bright yellow instead of pink. She is sad in one and smiling in the next. Or, maybe it’s the other way around. She wears a red swimsuit. Her feet don’t touch the floor.

“Everyone grab a basket,” Vi says, cutting the engine and cool air. “Two if you can.”

Myra shows me the dollar she’d scavenged on the way. The front door is covered in the gap-toothed smiles of kids asking in big block letters: HAVE YOU SEEN ME? I hide the polaroids in my pocket. Rudy and I race to the gumball machine.

August is over. A year passes. I step in sea glass. I fracture a small, important bone in my hand. I shave my legs for the first time and stare too long at the blood that spills when I nick the skin. I dump Jane’s jewelry in the Atlantic and return its box now filled with sand, snails, and seaweed.
to her closet floor. They bleach my black hair to look for lice. I get two inches taller. I turn eleven.

Jane calls me Calder. I tell her it’s Callie. Ivan calls me Callie. I tell him it’s Calder.

A storm breaks on the beach. Rain pierces the roof like the tinny rattle of a thousand prisoners, each dragging their cups across the bars of a cell.

*Water*, they beg.

*Water*, answers August.

Vi dabs the paintbrush twice against the towel. It tickles where she drags it along the underside of my arm. An animal is born from the bristles. Reds, yellows burst, popping from my summer-browned skin.

The animal has horns. The animal has a tail. The animal has two eyes that slant. “Eyes like ours,” Vi says. It has a stripe down its face and spots on its hands. Fur stands between its toes. Its tongue, blue and wavering, wriggles out from its mouth as if attempting an escape.

The room is black if not for the small yellow beam of Vi’s flashlight.

Jonas and Myra are closed off within the white walls of the bathroom.

They have a habit of hiding. It must have been easier in the long halls of their long-lost mansion on the hill. They’re a little younger, a little smaller than me.

Vi is halfway through creating another creature on Rudy’s leg when the door whips open with the wind. Vi curses once, but Rudy is already springing up off the bed, a red streak of pain abandoned, dripping down his shin.

Rudy slams his scrawny weight against the door. The wind screams, whistling through the gaps his ninety pounds can’t cover. One of its hinges flies across the room and slams into the far wall. The door wobbles dangerously over Rudy, his face and deaf ears sprayed with rain.

“Stay here,” Vi says as she squeezes her way out into the storm.

I fumble for the polaroids under my pillow. I clutch them and will the wind away.

I stare at the squares, and even in the lightless room, can see them clear behind my eyes. I make patterns in the print of the comforter, watch it warp and turn. I see her blank blue eyes that don’t crinkle like they should when she smiles.

I call her Wendy.

I don’t know her story. I can only make my own for her. She’s an only child, or she has two brothers. She’s on the soccer team, or she’s never set one delicate foot on an athletic field in her life. She loves the ocean but hates the sand. I bet she’s never been to Myrtle Beach. I look for her everywhere I go.

It isn’t much more than I know of Rudy, Vi, any of them, really.

Rudy is long and lanky, deaf, and deafening. He lets his mouth hang open like he’s gasping for air. His clothes hang off him like sheets left out to dry. I don’t speak his language.

Vi’s black hair falls straight down her back. Her fingers smell like smoke. Her parents were Korean immigrants. She was taken from them at ten, separated from her six siblings.
Jonas and Myra are a mystery. Twins. Once rich as all hell. Their parents’ arrest was the talk of the town. I wonder if they’re locked in the same prison as my mother.

I see and don’t see Rudy’s straining shape battle the door closed, the trailing red of his unfinished animal, and the too-big shirt now soaked against his skin. I hear and don’t hear his teeth grind with the effort, his small throat struggle against his closed mouth, and his shadow’s sneakers squeaking as they’re forced backwards.

My hair’s gone untended since Vi aged out and split town. Jane shaves it one day when she can’t get the knots to break. I watch long, bleached locks fall to the bone-dry bottom of the bathtub like the toy soldiers Rudy sends falling from the balcony to the blacktop.

Jane rakes the razor over my head again. Its buzzing, bug-like sound swarms in my ears. Ivan stands in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. He spits out the familiar lecture, Jane interrupting now and again to recite her lines. How they took us in when we had no one, rescued us from group homes, from rich, terrible parents, from city streets and prison blocks. Jane likes to imagine I’d be charged for my mother’s crime, locked up in her cell by virtue of my being born there. You’re so unhappy here, one of them says, just try and make it on your own. “I’ll give you right back,” says Ivan. He points a finger in my face. I think about leaning forward and biting till I see blood. “One of you.”

“Who?” I say.

“You choose.” “Me.”

He might say you wish. He might say not an option. He might slap me once across the cheek so it stings. Either way, he retreats to the office for a smoke, leaving me with Jane, my hair slain at my feet, and the buzzing teeth still gnawing at my neck.

I stare down at the befallen hair. I wonder how Wendy would look without hers. I wonder if she would still think I’m pretty. I search for some other similarity between us. Her light brown hair, her round, blue eyes, her milk-white waist are my opposites - a negative of my shaved head, my dark, crescent eyes, and my skin browned by summer and my mother’s Malaysian blood.

I’m picking up some sign language now that Vi’s not there to translate. Rudy points to my head when he sees me. Boy, he signs.

I chase him down the beach with my lighter.

A couple is here to see Rudy. The good kind - young, smiling and birdhouse-building. The Carpenters.

They’re not deaf, but they took American Sign Language as an elective in college, or they grew up with a deaf sibling, or they just want a kid with a story.

Rudy stands between Jane and Mrs. Carpenter up in the parking lot.

Jonas, Myra, and me are on the beach, hurling stones and shells into the sea.

“You kids are so lucky to live on the beach,” says Mr. Carpenter. “When I was young, I would’ve killed for this view. The sand, the sun, the sea.” He is tall and blonde, tanned like leather and just past thirty. He wears sunglasses atop his head and red swim shorts.
Myra nods. Jonas ignores, now pushing scavenged sea glass in circles with a thin stick. The man pets Nadia from next door on the head. He smooths her hair. I watch him from between the twins.

Nadia’s swimsuit is the same bright red as Wendy’s. My palms itch. I shove them in the sand.

“I grew up in a big, old house in Illinois. You know where that is?” he says. “Nowhere good. There wasn’t a beach like this for miles. Snow taller than you.” He sighs. He puts Nadia on his lap. He smiles. “But we spent our summers here. And I met my first love. We were probably your age. She kissed me at the top of the ferris wheel and we swam naked in the ocean. Don’t you love the feeling of warm water on your body?”

Jonas was looking at him now.

“She was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen,” he says and looks at Myra. “She looked a lot like you.”

I shake the sand from my hands. The man’s words turn my stomach with some familiar, unnamed nausea.

I want to kick sand in his face. I want to scream until he runs. I want to break his thumbs.

There are people all around. Sunburned kids and their lotion-covered mothers. College kids and their hand-rolled cigarettes. Vacant women.

I only take Nadia’s hand and drag her up to the Shady Seashell, trusting the twins to follow me. When I turn to check, they are in tow, in silent agreement if not understanding. And there is Mr. Carpenter smiling like a shark back on the beach.

Jane paints the place, its outside at least, and it returns to its original sky blue. Myra stops talking altogether. Jonas is stung by a jellyfish on their birthday. Rudy stays on with us when the Carpenters go back on their offer. Wendy keeps me up at night. I feel her burning holes in my head when I sleep.

Jane tells Myra and me to top off the shampoo bottles with water to keep them full. The bathroom is a would-be white which comes closer and closer to the yellow of Ivan’s teeth every year. In the tub, dolls’ heads circle the drain. Glitter litters the sink. Globs of nail polish stick like tar to the tile floor. In the corner sit scorched magazine covers, failed science experiments, and a box of baby teeth.

The sink hisses out a small stream of lukewarm water. The pipes whine with effort while we work.

Myra, without looking me in the eye, says her first words in four months. “Do you think I’m beautiful?”

Girls like her always are. Their eyes are round and shining. Their skin is smooth and white as if there were no blood running under it.

Their wrists are slim. Their necks belong to pearls and precious stones. Myra and Wendy could be sisters.

“You talk now?” I say and screw the lid back onto a bottle of scentless shampoo.

She only shakes her head and tops off the next bottle. Rudy turns twelve the day I turn thirteen. It’s a dark night in
August and we watch fireworks explode off the boardwalk. I jump and wave my hands in time with the explosions to help him make the sound in his head. He laughs like a dog and takes one of my hands over his heart.

*Feel,* he signs with his free hand, and there we stand, feeling the fireworks echo in his small and screaming chest.

Back inside, my legs are like jelly. I am thirteen. I wonder if Wendy would be able to tell. I wonder what’s changed.

One of the lamps in mine and Myra’s room is busted. It coats the room in a dingy light like dusk.

Rudy returns with a brownie for us to split and a single cigarette, each snagged from the front desk downstairs.

We take small, awful puffs off the cigarette, and cough it back up like tar.

Wendy calls from her place beneath my pillows.

I don’t remember leaning over, or moving the pillow back to reveal the polaroid photos, or taking them in both hands back to Rudy. I only remember looking her in those familiar eyes and turning them toward the boy I’d never called my brother before that night, and his hungry hands reaching for Wendy.

We each hold a piece of her. He has the smiling square held carefully at his fingertips. I hold her blank stare.

His face relaxes. His eyes take her in. His hands almost shake. I watch blood rush to his cheeks. I watch him run a thumb over her dangling legs. I swear I hear her howl from under his fingers.


He doesn’t hear me. He won’t look at me. I wave both hands in front of his face, but he’s somewhere I can’t go.

I punch him in the leg. I scream his name an inch from his ear.

With shaking hands, I sign every word I can remember, the curse words he’s taught me. *Give, please, back, want, shit, mine, mine, mine.*

Behind us, a gun is shot on screen. The bullet hits no one.

Beyond us, fireworks burst against a purple sky. I wish he would feel them in his chest again, look up and call me some name I don’t know the sign for.

I don’t remember the reaching, I only remember the ripping.

Sideways. Torso snapped from her legs like a Black Dahlia. She drifted in pieces to the floor. Still, she smiled. She didn’t scream. She didn’t beg. She didn’t cry or crawl across the floor on her arms to me.

Rudy looked up, but I didn’t recognize him anymore.

“Get out,” I said. “Get out!” I screamed when he just sat there, his eyes wide and lost.

I didn’t think before pulling out the lighter I’d nicked along with Wendy.
Rudy’s mouth was wide open when I put the lit cigarette to his cheek. It shook between my fingers. It left a red crescent in the pale baby fat of his cheeks. I forced it further, my angry eyes on its burning end.

I wish I could say the look on his face was one of betrayal, or disbelief. It wasn’t.

I wish I could say the building was up to code.

I wish I could say he didn’t cry out, that I didn’t drop my weapon at the noiseless gasp of it, that the still burning stick didn’t produce a flame that ran from the harsh carpet to the curtains.

It swallowed what was left of Wendy in one bite. It licked up at Rudy’s legs as it spread, and he ran for the door. My eyes prickled and watered like faucets. Outside was cool and unfeeling and unable to mute the roaring fire started in room 201.

Is it obvious? Is it clear my fire burned its way through three rooms before it could be stopped? That I told Jane and Ivan it was Rudy who set the blaze, who stole the cigarette? How Rudy, unable to speak in his own defense, ran away before they could think of what to do with him?

How he must have cried? How no one ever found him?

Until someone did. Find him, I mean.

Eight miles up Cape Fear River three years from our last summer. He never let Vi or Jane or anyone teach him how to swim. His mouth was wide open when he hit the water. I know it was. Sometimes I see his shape on the Atlantic. Sometimes I see his arms, flapping on the air like the bug he was when he fell to the water. Sometimes I see those wings take him two miles higher and up the coast. Sometimes I hear his sneakers slap the pavement and stop before my door.

By Lucy Behr