

Here.

LITERARY MAGAZINE

02

2022 ISSUE



JUXTAPOSE BY LILLY JOHNSON / CHARLESTON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 10

Manifesto

from Mia Pohlman and
the 2021-2022 Here. Student Editorial Board

We are here. This magazine is a place for young people from Southeast Missouri to have our perspectives reside. Young people's ideas, beliefs and questions about the world enrich all of our conversations as we work together to celebrate our joys and progress solutions to our struggles. Young people are here, and we want to share about the world from our points of view.

Look here. Writing and art looks at the particular, the concrete. It examines that which others take for granted. It sees and pays attention to detail. Believing the people and places around us are worthy of attention, we give our curiosity to here, our place in Southeast Missouri.

Here matters. Southeast Missouri is our home, and we want to be the ones writing the story and contributing to the conversation about our region. Providing young people with the tools to pursue career paths in the arts after high school and contribute to the global conversation about the region we are from matters.

And so, for the past year, students from five schools across Southeast Missouri have met once a month as part of the inaugural Here. Student Editorial Board. At these meetings, we have learned writing and art skills, as well as post-graduation tips for pursuing the arts, from professional writers and

artists in our community. We have also read the writing and viewed the art of our peers from 13 schools throughout our region who submitted their work for consideration of publication, participating in critiques about each piece as we decided what to publish here. We have learned about people, spaces and opportunities within the local art community, ate meals together, and made friends with students from other schools along the way.

This literary magazine is the fruit of our labors. We hope you enjoy reading and thinking about the issues, questions and dreams that matter to young people Here.

The Eye of the Storm

by Apollo Forhan

STE. GENEVIEVE HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

The people who visit the town come to see the storm, but they never will.

"You know they make us do these drills 'cause its comin' back, right?"

"What?"

"The storm. It's been 50 years, so it's comin' back."

We were huddled up against the walls of our cinderblock school, heads down and pressed against the painted walls.

"I don't believe you. I don't think it's real. Just a normal tornado."

"And the fact that it's blood red?"

"Clay deposits."

My friend scoffed, and I could practically hear him rolling his eyes.

"Oh yeah? What about the swirling hands? The eye?"

I could hear the sounds of a lanyard jingling and heels making their way towards us.

"Storms don't have eyes," I hissed. "Unless they're hurricanes, and we're landlocked."

"What about the hands?"

"People hallucinate before they die."

"The screaming? The smell of rotting flesh?"

"People. Hallucinate. When they. Die." I said through gritted teeth.

How long was this drill going to last?

"You two, quiet." The teacher said, directly behind us.

I could just kick her. Stretch out my leg, and kick her. No one has to know. Well, the school would know, and then Dad would know, then he'd be all, "What's wrong with you," and, "You're gonna go to Hell." Hope I see you there, Pops.

The house was dark and locked, as it usually was, and I sat on the porch. The wind chime, about as old as I was and with the delicate rolls of metal dangling from below a cross, jingled faintly in the gentle breeze

that seemed omnipresent. The sky was overcast, as it usually was, and I could see for miles, the flat plains of the farm stretching off into the horizon. The dandelions in the driveway waved gently, growing with a perseverance I myself could not muster; when they began to shake from an approaching truck, I wished I could shake with them.

I kept myself from jumping at the slam of the door and the crunch of gravel.

"The hell've you been doing, boy? Get in the damn house, storm's coming!"

"I don't —"

"I don't care! Get inside and move some shit to the basement."

As the door swung open, I sighed and went inside. The smell of smoke hung in the air, and I thought fondly of when that wasn't the case. I walked towards my room, also missing when I was allowed to have a door.

But when I'm under his roof, privacy is a privilege I don't have.

"No, none of your pansy shit, essentials only."

"I'm gonna grab a book to read while we're —"

"Essentials. Only."

Of course, to him, liquor's essential. What drink number is that, beloved father? Nine?

When I made it down to the basement, he was sitting in one of the beat-up lawn chairs we kept down there for when it was nice in the summertime, another cigarette in his mouth and his feet up on a cooler.

"Finally, something knocked some sense into ya. You can go grab some of your shit now — only the essentials."

I made my way up the steps, wincing at the creaks of the ancient wood, and glanced back at my dad, framed against that disgusting wood paneling. I tried to ignore that stupid, familiar blazing red hat he wore to cover up his bald head. The spring-bound

door swung shut as I pushed through it, and I trudged toward my room, trying to think of what I could save and what I could hide. The rumbling of the winds had grown louder by this point, and the roaring of rain pounded on the leaky metal roof.

When I made it back to the basement door, I tried to shoulder it open. It didn't budge.

"Dad?" I called. "Door's jammed, and my arms are full."

"Door's not jammed, Son, it's locked."

I was speechless.

"You need to grow up and quit actin' the way you do, and this is the quickest way. You can come back when you learn to quit bein' a coward and be a man."

My supplies — practically all of my possessions my dad knew about — dropped to the ground, and the power flickered off.

"What?" I was beginning to choke up. What kind of monster does this?

"I said —"

"I heard you," I replied, my voice even and quiet against the howling winds.

As the thunder shook the house, I went back to my room. I sat at my desk — built by my own hands so I could learn what a real job's like — and held a shaky tube of mascara in my hands. By the flashes of lightning, I assembled something that felt more ... me.

Clothes I wanted to wear.

A face I wanted to have.

Finishing up, I sighed and stepped outside. It was a bit of a Midwesternism to sit and watch storms go through, knowing that wherever it takes you will be better than here, but I did, anyway.

And then I saw it.

A blood-red funnel cutting against the grassy green and cloudy grays of the sky.

And it was heading towards me, some

sort of light at the top beckoning me like a sick lighthouse to a dying sailor, a sickly yellow light like a false sun.

The grass around me rattled, the driveway dandelions shaking with a fear I shared. Dogs — or at least I hoped they were dogs — howled in the distance, harmonizing with the winds that blew my hair and watered my eyes.

Like Odysseus to the sirens, I headed for it.

Maybe it was the color dulling my senses, or maybe my adrenaline, but it felt like the howling gales were ... gentler. My limbs felt heavy, like when you get off of a trampoline and feel like you're still bouncing. I made it within 30 feet of the storm, a towering pillar of swirling crimson, and I felt calm.

I could see the hands, of course, swirling in the red, reaching towards me, like open arms offering a hug.

And I reached towards them.

Hands.

A scarlet wash over everything in sight.

And no pain.

I felt like I was floating, flying even.

And in the center of the swirling carmine, a grand eye, yellow like the sun and blindingly bright.

I felt home.

The aftermath of the storm was the same as every other storm: swaths of destruction in paths, damage that wouldn't be mended until it was necessary.

Everything was normal, and everyone was safe, their basements and shelters well-built for this occasion.

Save for one.

A man, a single father with his son nowhere to be found, found impaled on the wood paneling of his basement, cigarette in his mouth and beer bottle in his hand. His daughter will be sorely missed.



THE WONDERFUL WORLD, CADEN GURLEY / PORTAGEVILLE HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 10

My Wishes

by Erin Urhahn

OAK RIDGE HIGH SCHOOL SCHOOL / GRADE 11

If I had hands, I'd play the piano.

If I knew I'd grow up, I'd cherish my youth.

If I could do high school all over again, I wouldn't.

Once was enough.

If I had a heart of love, I'd be less hostile.

If I knew my mother felt unseen, I'd compliment her.

If I liked vegetables, I'd only eat healthily.

If I had eyes, I'd love purple more than any other color.

If I knew I would one day perish, I'd stop complaining.

If my hair were straight,

I'd be just as unsatisfied as I am with curly hair.

If I had legs, I'd never stop running and skipping.

If I knew my dad would listen,

I'd tell him I miss him when he's not home.

If I were pretty, I wouldn't lie with concealer.

If I had a brain, I'd take a chemistry class.

If I knew life was short, I wouldn't hit the snooze button.

If suffering for another was love,

I'd suffer more.

If I had an education, I'd spend days upon weeks reading.

If I knew I'd have grandchildren,

I'd make a photobook for their little fingers to flip through.

If I cared less about others' opinions, I'd always wear a dress.

If I had my own house, I'd bring my cat inside.

If I had a room, I'd keep it spotless.

If I believed in a God of creation,

I'd let him create a life for me.

If I had lips, I'd paint them with sparkles.

If I knew my husband was waiting for me,

I'd stop fighting so hard to find him.

If people asked, I'd express the emotions I felt.

If I had ears, I'd bless them with One Direction.

If I knew money was worthless, I'd find a job I liked.

If I had a car, I'd name him Brad.

If I had friends, I would call them.

If I knew I was leaving the nest soon, I'd hug my family.

If I were aware of my life,

I'd start to live again.

If I had a pencil, I'd write down my heart and give it to the world.

If I knew I was Erin, I'd stop looking for her.

If, for a minute, the world's attention was at my hands,

I would say:

Love is always the answer.

Life is trying to figure out the question;

if it exists.



SIMPLICITY, AVA BRINER / JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 10

Adult Boot Camp

Tori Bollinger

JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

My stomach fluttering as I left the safety of my mom’s car, I stumbled to the front window of American Ice Cream (AIC), splashing through the puddles and tripping over potholes in the concrete. Before even reaching the window, I was motioned to walk around to the back door by an employee not much older, it seemed, than my 14-year-old self. There, I took my first steps into the place that would teach me countless life lessons for the next four years.

The girl with dark brown hair who had greeted me now bombarded me with a mountain of tasks I needed to do before going up front. “Here are your work shirts. Go to the bathroom and change into one. Then, wash your hands, put on this hat, read the employee handbook and come find me when you are done,” the nameless girl said.

I went to the bathroom just as she said and slipped on my new black shirt with an American flag. After I changed my shirt, I went to wash my hands in the not-so-stainless, stainless-steel sink.

I know she left the employee handbook here somewhere, I thought as I searched for the two-page thin “book.” When I found it and began reading, I saw rule after rule listed, each one with its own difficulty level. “Do not wear any colors other than red, white, blue, black, gray or khaki” glared at me on the first page.

Looking down at my bright pink leggings, I instantly thought, I am going to be fired on my first day!

After finishing reading the handbook and placing my phone on a shelf as directed, I walked back towards the door I entered through, finding the dark-haired girl again. Pointing to a younger girl nearby, she said, “Hi, my name is Kayla, and I will be training you until seven, and then Tatum will take over.”

Kayla gazed at my outfit like Regina George from “Mean Girls.” I knew pink leggings were not allowed per the handbook, but her look made it clear they were not

allowed! I stood there like a lost puppy in a new city.

“Do not wear those leggings here again or else our boss will fire you,” Kayla cautioned. In response, I mutely nodded in agreement.

After the clothing comment, she took me around on a tour of AIC while she explained different parts of the job, deciding at the end it was time for me to make my first sweet ice cream treat. A delicate and frail old man proudly wearing a U.S. Marines cap ambled towards the walk-up, the window at which people place their food orders.

“I would like a regular Butterfinger concrete and a small dixie,” the veteran requested.

What is a regular, and what in the world is a dixie?

Kayla called me over to the ice cream machine and answered both of my questions as if she had read my mind. A dixie was a cup of ice cream, so I grabbed a small, white styrofoam cup and filled it with five ounces of vanilla ice cream. Next, I needed to prepare the regular — also known as a medium — Butterfinger. With Kayla’s help, I added six tablespoons of Butterfinger to the cup, along with 21 ounces of ice cream. When it came time to mix the concrete, I learned to gently and repeatedly tap a foot pedal on the machine so the topping does not fly out of the cup, and I smiled when the Marine thanked me for his treat.

Following my successful first concrete, Kayla ushered me to the back and pointed at a white paper with an 8x20 black grid on it. The grid listed all of the employees’ names and when they worked. Kayla was at the top of the grid, which signified she was the person who had worked at AIC the longest. My eyes ran their way down the list of employees and found my name at the bottom — the newest one.

“This is the schedule, and it tells you when you work,” Kayla said. “I am also going to add you to the American Ice Cream GroupMe,” which I learned is used by AIC to send

out weekly schedules and mass text messages from the boss.

At seven that night, Kayla’s shift was over and another worker came in to take her place. I continued to mix concretes and learn how to make new treats. AIC closes at 10 p.m. every night, so the dishes must be started at 9 p.m. for them to be washed, dried and put away before closing. Since Kayla left and Tatum was now responsible for me, she noted, “Tori, since you are the newest employee here, you will be doing the dishes tonight. They aren’t fun to do, so I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK! I actually enjoy doing dishes at home,” I replied.

“Hanging above the back desk, there is a list of things you need to wash,” Tatum said as she pointed to a collection of laminated computer papers held together by a black binder clip. “In addition to the dishwashing list, there are other lists that tell you everything: how to make toppings, what the front closers should be doing and how to open.”

She then led me to the sink, so I could start washing the mound of dishes that had compiled from the earlier hours. *I still have so much to learn, I thought. This is going to be much more than a job. American Ice Cream is going to be my adult boot camp.*

Now, four years into my ice cream career, my 18-year-old legs proudly strut into the back door of AIC. I watch naïve girls leave their parents’ car as I once did, and instead of Kayla telling them to go to the back door, I guide them. When I look at the scheduling grid, my name is the second from the top, showing I am one of the girls who has been here the longest.

When new workers are hired, I help them understand that at AIC, they will learn to make ice cream, yes, and to resolve conflicts, but they will also gain many lifelong friends here like I have.

Lovely, but Different

by Altyn Kate Timlin

NOTRE DAME REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 9

Two souls met by accident now inseparable
Two best friends that saved each other
A pair of hearts that dance together
Every laugh every hug every handshake
A new core memory that will never be forsaken
The friendship between the two sisters is not blood but choice
Bonded together, their friendship like a song
Together or apart, near or far, always playing
Like a line holding them together, flowering and bursting with sunlight and love
But soon, it will all change
Not disappear, but change
The innocence of childhood replaced with the richness that comes from evolving
Both lovely but different

Bliss

Lydia Chotrow

PERRYVILLE HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 11

The Little Girl walked slowly through the black expanse. There was nothing in front of her and nothing behind. She was alone, yet she was not afraid. As she walked along, her white tulle dress swayed around her, and her pretty golden locks fell gently down her back. She knew she had been walking for quite some time, but she did not tire nor consider stopping.

She was still walking, when suddenly, the sound of footsteps resounded through the silence. The Little Girl stopped when the tip of a cane and two black shoes appeared in front of her. The Little Girl’s eyes traveled upwards to the face of this new companion before her. In front of her stood a tall man; he looked gaunt to her, as if someone had pulled on his head and feet a little too much. His face was pale, and his eyes were like the blood that drips from a wound. The man carried a severe-looking cane and was dressed in fine clothes made of black silk. He smiled menacingly at the Little Girl as she studied him. She was unsure of him; his eyes held a secretive glint to them she felt wary of.

“Hello, Little Girl,” he greeted her in a raspy voice, as if he had swallowed some gravel. “Who are you?” the Little Girl asked.

“No one terribly important. I only came to ask you a question,” he said tritely.

“What is your question?” she asked curiously.

“Would you like to know?” The man quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Know what?”

“Would you like to know?” he repeated.

At her confused look, the man swept his cane in a wide motion and pointed to her right. The Little Girl looked to where he pointed, and her eyes widened. Where there had once been nothing but black, there was now white, but the white was not empty, as the black had been. Inside the white were creatures; they were all different shapes and sizes. The only common factor of the creatures was that they were terrifying. Some had twisted features and jowls that hung open and swayed with their movements. Others had eyes hanging from their head or blood pooling in their sunken heads. The sounds they made were horrid — moans, screeches and grunts rose from them. The Little Girl gasped and took a step away. The man placed a hand behind her, though, and forced her to look at the creatures.

As she continued watching, she saw the creatures licking at the white greedily. Wherever one of the creatures licked, the place slowly turned black, the same black she had been walking through for quite some time.

The man looked at her again and asked, “Would you like to know?”

“Do I have to?” The Little Girl asked on a shaky breath.

“No, but if you do, then you’ll know,” he chuckled, as if amused by his own words.

“What will I know?” She furrowed her eyebrows.

“What you should know,” he said and smiled like he was in on a secret he couldn’t be bothered to tell her.

The Little Girl was confused by his words, but still, she continued with her questions.

“What if I don’t?”

“Then you may turn around and walk away.”

She pondered for a moment, looked to her right at the creatures, then to her left at the endless black. Hesitantly, she took a small step toward the creatures, and as she did, a dark stain started to grow on her dress. It was a black spot that slowly started creeping up and devouring the white. The Little Girl quickly stumbled back, and the black spot faded into white once again, with nothing but a tiny little dot left. She turned to the man and asked, “What was that?”

“The consequences of knowing.” He stared at her intensely, waiting with an expectant look on his face, then asked for a final time, “Would you like to know?”

The Little Girl was quiet as she answered the man, her voice barely above a whisper.

“No, I would not like to know.”

The man looked disgruntled for a moment, seemingly bothered by her answer, but then shrugged uncaringly and strutted over into the mass of creatures. The Little Girl turned away from the man and the creatures and started to walk. She stopped only for a moment and looked over her shoulder, but there was nothing there. She went forward again, and the farther she went, the more the memory of what had occurred faded from her mind, until she could not remember at all.

The Little Girl walked slowly through the black expanse. There was nothing in front of her and nothing behind. She was alone, and oddly, she was a little bit afraid.



RAKING SUMMER, AUTUMN MCBRYDE / JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 10

Owning Societal Identity as a Multicultural Person

by Zariya Hitchcock-Mason

JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 10

“Woah! Your mom’s white, but you’re Black? So, are you shipped from Africa?”

This particular question isn’t as rare now as it was the first time I heard it when I was seven and a classmate saw my white mom for the first time. The skin color makes it pretty uncanny to most people to see the resemblance; when I first heard it, I just laughed, ‘cause it was such a silly question, but the question woke up my sense of racial ambiguity. For the first time ever, I noticed there wasn’t anyone like me in my class. I then talked to my biracial peers who have had some scarily similar experiences as I have, and it didn’t matter what cultures or races they were mixed from. That then gave me the conclusion of how cultural identity and societal identity go hand-in-hand in being onerous to a multicultural person.

As you can tell from my story, being the only one in my classroom like me was tough, but it’s even worse when your parents don’t look like you — and confusing. Multicultural people have two or more cultures within them, which can be a blessing and a curse. And to carry those beautiful curses that no one can truly explain and being outcasted by not only society but even your own cultures can cause hesitation and confusion into figuring out the sole identity of that multiracial person, not only as a person, but also how their particular cultures can differ and contract into defining who they are. This long process is especially individualistic and lonesome.

Being biracial comes with a unique perspective and diversity within diversity. For example, a Black and Asian man: Not only is the man Asian, he is also Black. And in America, diversity comes in one color for the most part, so when two cultures come in one person, neither Asians nor African Americans can tell that man how he’s going to be seen by the rest of society or what anyone will say to him walking down the street. It is the main cause of individualism; not a single half of you can tell you who you are and what society will throw at you.

An experimental study found the perceived benefits and downsides to being multicultural. The main researcher and writer of the study, Jordan Soliz, wrote in the study, “Early conceptual and the-

oretical work positioned multiethnic-racial identity as a marginalized experience based on the idea that mixed heritage would be contested by others, causing difficult identity development issues. Further, this theorizing assumed these individuals would experience what Vivero and Jenkins later labeled ‘cultural homelessness.’” In short, individuals from mixed backgrounds would not have a strong and secure sense of affiliation or belongingness with ethnic-racial groups in society. In turn, this lack of a distinct in-group would lead to experiences of marginalization in society, with negative implications for well-being. The text implies the multiethnic racial identity is largely unseen and isolated from parts of their cultures.

The idea of belonging into a group is to not be alone in your culture or societal identity; the people in the group have experienced similar things as you and do the same traditions as you. But the multiracial don’t have that. To their groups, they don’t apply to the generics, and even though they are similar, they see each other as not the same.

Another challenge is self-identification; understanding yourself is part of growing up, and to fully grasp the sense of self-identification is labeling yourself with things that apply to you. When those groups of identification don’t exactly feel applicable, it provides a whole new set of questions unheard of to the general population. Even though you technically apply to those groups, sometimes, those groups don’t want you because of your other halves.

In the article “Seven Essential Facts About Multiracial Youth,” Astrea Greig writes some interesting insider facts about the experiences of the multiethnic. She states, “Multiracial youth and mixed families often experience unique types of discrimination and microaggressions. Among the multiple types, one is exclusion or isolation in which multiracial people are excluded due to their mixed status. For example, an Asian and white biracial child may not be treated as equally as his or her monoracial siblings or cousins at family gatherings by disapproving distant relatives.” In this statement, Greig signifies the exemption of mixed children from parts of their culture, giving attention to how truly unique the multicultur-

al experience is and how difficult it can be to reach self-actualization due to “cultural homelessness” as Vivero and Jenkins put it.

“You’re Black, Zariya, that means you need lotion — no child of mine is going anywhere with ashy knees.” “Don’t forget you’re white, so stop acting like you’re only Black.” These are some of the phrases from the people around me, and the statements are rather contradictory. There are many times in life someone will ask you to define yourself in as few words as possible, and adding an additional culture makes it very difficult for everyone to understand and tedious for the multiethnic to explain themselves. In “What You’ll Never Understand About Being Biracial,” an introspective article by Brianna Moné, Moné converses with psychologist doctor Sarah Gaither, stating, “The big problem is that, as a society, we think in either-or categories. You can only be one thing or another. You can’t be two things at the same time.” Moné notices acquiring many races can be inconsistent when it comes to being perceived, thus giving the pressured option to pick only one. Doing this can make it easier in society but can be self-inflicting.

Society has always emphasized race and culture; it can be seen in nationality, standardized tests and filling diversity quotas. Giving more than one answer on those sheets is confounding to the person filling it out and the one receiving data. Because of the paradoxical way racial identity is supposed to work objectively but is used subjectively, people take race subjectively into their own encounters and experiences, while superficially using race from data research to applied science. In the same article by Moné, she interviews Samantha Ferguson. Ferguson declares, “People like a for-sure answer. People like math, because if you solve a problem, you have an answer, and that’s just the answer. I can’t just choose. It’s like asking, what half of yourself do you like better?” Divulging the matter of self-exterior and how other people perceive the multiracial can give the mixed-race community trepidation and therefore result in a fragile sense of self-identity.

“Your hair is so pretty, can you give it

to me?” “I’d kill for your skin tone, it’s the perfect color!” Some could dismiss the challenges of being multiethnic because of the accusatory benefits that come with the identity. In the article “The Biracial Advantage” by Jennifer Latson, Latson affirms, “Studies show that multiracial people tend to be perceived as more attractive than their monoracial peers, among other advantages.” The perception of biracial people through the media and people who aren’t opposed to the multicultural seems to have abnormal fetishizations due to their highlighted features of tan skin, brighter eyes and unique hair. Another option is the fetishizing of the biracial culture; monoracial peers can develop a keen disliking for being compared to their multiethnic counterparts. Another argument could be the mixed community has a keen ability to understand more complex social constructs and empathize with other minority members. In the same article, Latson interviews social psychologist Sarah Gaither as she states, “One advantage of embracing mixedness, she says, is the mental flexibility that multiracial people develop when, from a young age, they learn to switch seamlessly between their racial identities. In a 2015 study, she found that multiracial people demonstrated greater creative problem-solving skills than monoracials — but only after they’d been primed to think about their multiple identities beforehand.” Because of the individualistic mindset and problematic background of the micro-community, however, the benefits come from the strife of figuring out themselves and fully reaching self-actualization.

To conclude, biracial people have a challenging journey with claiming their cultures and facing society. The intricacy of the individualistic findings of self and culture is something all multicultural have to go through. In addition to finding and claiming a culture, the societal aspect pressures the biracial community to confine their alleged subsidiary that makes them whole. And the next time someone asks me if I’m shipped from Africa, I’ll just say, “Sure.”



2021-2022 Here. Student Editorial Board

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Thank you.

To the writers and artists in our community who passed along their knowledge, skill and wisdom through leading workshops for the 2021-2022 Here. Literary Magazine program:

Aaron Eisenhauer
rustmedia photo + video producer

Amanda Flinn
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Addy Garagnani
CAPE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 10

Best books I've read: "The Problem With Forever," by Jennifer L. Armentrout; "Call Me By Your Name," by André Aciman; and "Second Chance Summer," by Morgan Matson
I like to write: About my feelings and the people around me. I like to make art about either what inspires me right then or just to do something to help me concentrate.
Song I'm currently obsessed with: "Heatwaves," by Glass Animals
In the future: I plan to become an elementary teacher, interior designer or zoologist and continue writing.
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: The Student Aquatic Center pool at Cape Central



Alexis Weibrecht
CAPE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 10

Best book I've read: "Throne of Glass," by Sarah J. Maas
I like writing because: I'm able to put my thoughts into great pieces of work. I also use writing as an escape from the real world.
Song I'm currently obsessed with: So many songs, it would be hard to name just one. However, one song I like is "We are Bulletproof," by The Eternal.
In the future: As of right now, I don't have any plans for the future; I'm going to take life one step at a time.
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: The weather. This is because I have gotten out of school because of it.



Altyn Timlin
NOTRE DAME REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 9

Favorite books: "Tweet Cute," by Emma Lord; "The Selection," by Kiera Cass; and "To Kill a Mockingbird," by Harper Lee
Favorite artists and writers: Taylor Swift, Harry Styles and Shannon Messenger
I love to write and create art about: My daydreams and stresses
Song I'm currently obsessed with: "Angel Eyes," by Abba, because it reminds me of summer.
In the future: I really want to do something with design — either fashion, textile or architectural.
Favorite memories from high school: Meeting so many new people and getting to spend every day with my best friends! Also, the car rides with my sister.
My catchphrase: "Slay"



Ben Gabriel
JACKSON SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 9

Best book I've read: "Prisoner B-3087," by Alan Gratz
Favorite writers and artists: Jeff Zentner, Alan Gratz and John Williams
I like to: Write poetry and paint
Song I'm currently obsessed with: "Old Flame," by Alabama
Future plans: Become a teacher
Favorite high school memory: Hanging out with my friends at my school's spring event
My catchphrase: "You've got to be kidding me."
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: Walking in Downtown Cape



Ben Oliver
CHARLESTON HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 12

Favorite high school memory: Playing at my town's talent showcase. I sang a Foo Fighters' song dedicated to my dad.

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Charlie Spence
NOTRE DAME REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 9

Best book I've read: "The Adoration of Jenna Fox," by Mary E. Pearson. It is really easy to follow, and it also raises some pretty interesting questions about morality and what defines a human being.
Favorite writers: H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe and Shakespeare.
I enjoy these writers because of how they have influenced and changed the world of literature for the better.
In the future: I want to study computer science and either be a computer scientist or a video game designer!
My catchphrase: It changes a lot, but right now, I find myself saying the word "epic" an abnormal amount of times throughout the day.
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: The wildlife. I love being able to see all kinds of different animals in my backyard every day!



Kyleigh Pawlowski
ADVANCE HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 9

Favorite book: "The Collector," by John Fowles
Favorite art piece: "Ballet With Magic," by Leonid Afremov
Favorite song: "Riptide," by Vance Joy
In the future: I plan to go to college to learn more about filmmaking/editing or graphic design.
My catchphrase: "Oh, my gosh!"
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: The hills! It's so fun going up and down them!



Lilly Johnson
CHARLESTON HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 10

Best book I've read: "Far From You," by Tess Sharpe
Favorite writers and artists: Rachel Smythe, Alice Oseman and Kaiu Shirai
Song I'm currently obsessed with: "Abyss," by Jin
In the future: I plan to go to college and get a degree in art education.
Favorite high school memory: Playing donkey basketball with my classmates
My catchphrase: The word I'm constantly saying is "bro" these days.
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: How close-knit the communities are.



Mia Timlin
NOTRE DAME REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
Grade 12

Favorite book: It's impossible to pick the best book I've ever read, but "A Room With a View," by E. M. Forster, or "The House in the Cerulean Sea," by TJ Klune, are two of my favorites.
Favorite writers: I love Joan Didion because she's observant, Taylor Swift because she can make the abstract come to life with music and Lauren Shippen because she tells stories in unique ways.
Songs I'm currently obsessed with: "King," by Florence + the Machine, and "Burn Out," by Isabel Pless
Favorite high school memory: Having a water balloon fight during my web broadcasting class
Favorite thing about Southeast Missouri: How living here for the past five years has broadened my perspective and introduced me to the different ways people live and interact.

Senior

by Abbigail Naes

CAMPBELL HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

Today, I take my last step into the building that has taught me. Out of the past 14 years, nine out of 12 months, from 8 a.m. to 3:15, this home away from home has seen my tears of anguish and desperation, but also the smiles and laughter of triumph. It was here I overcame my biggest problems and fears, but also where I got them. When I leave today, I will never be the same. I may come back here, but never as I was. For I will be granted the great pleasure of walking this stage where I will take my last and final steps. I will walk out of the doors knowing I have accomplished something I never thought I could. My final goodbye to my friends who were there as I grew, the teachers who taught me well, and last but not least, my home away from home. I leave you for the last time not as a student but as the adult you raised me to be.

Counting Rings

by Mia Timlin

NOTRE DAME REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

Sometimes, I ache for the person I will be five, 10, 15 years from now — a stranger.

And when I am her, what will become of the girl I am now?

The one cleaning her bedroom at two in the morning, cramming folded T-shirts into stuffed drawers knowing they'll come out again wrinkled,

and whose left-hand fingers are coated in melted chocolate, recording each little thought in a notebook before it can melt away — panicking at the thought of others reading it.

This girl I know so well, getting out of bed in the dark to put on a dress because reading "Pride and Prejudice" in pajamas just doesn't feel right.

Will she slip below the surface like the others?

I can count them inside me like the rings of a tree stump.

The 3-year-old running around in crooked green fairy wings, collecting a bouquet of dandelions for her mother,

the 5-year-old cutting off her braid because it got in the way of the yellow construction paper she was turning into a countdown chain,

the 7-year-old twirling to a Nora Jones song with a long purple scarf, tumbling when her foot got caught in the sheer fabric.

They are just as much strangers as that girl I have yet to become —

a photograph I saw in an album years ago, or a dream I forgot I had.

Or what about the ones who feel more like friends I haven't talked to in too long?

The 12-year-old who looped thousands of hopscotch boxes around the entire block during the summertime,

the 13-year-old who wrote bad poetry and embarrassing time capsule letters to her future self,

the 15-year-old whose chest crushed with real panic for the first time, waiting to make a left turn across busy traffic.

I can't remember all these girls well,

sometimes I loathe them — mostly I miss them.

The reminders of what I once was, and what I am now, that I can never be again.

But I know they are there,

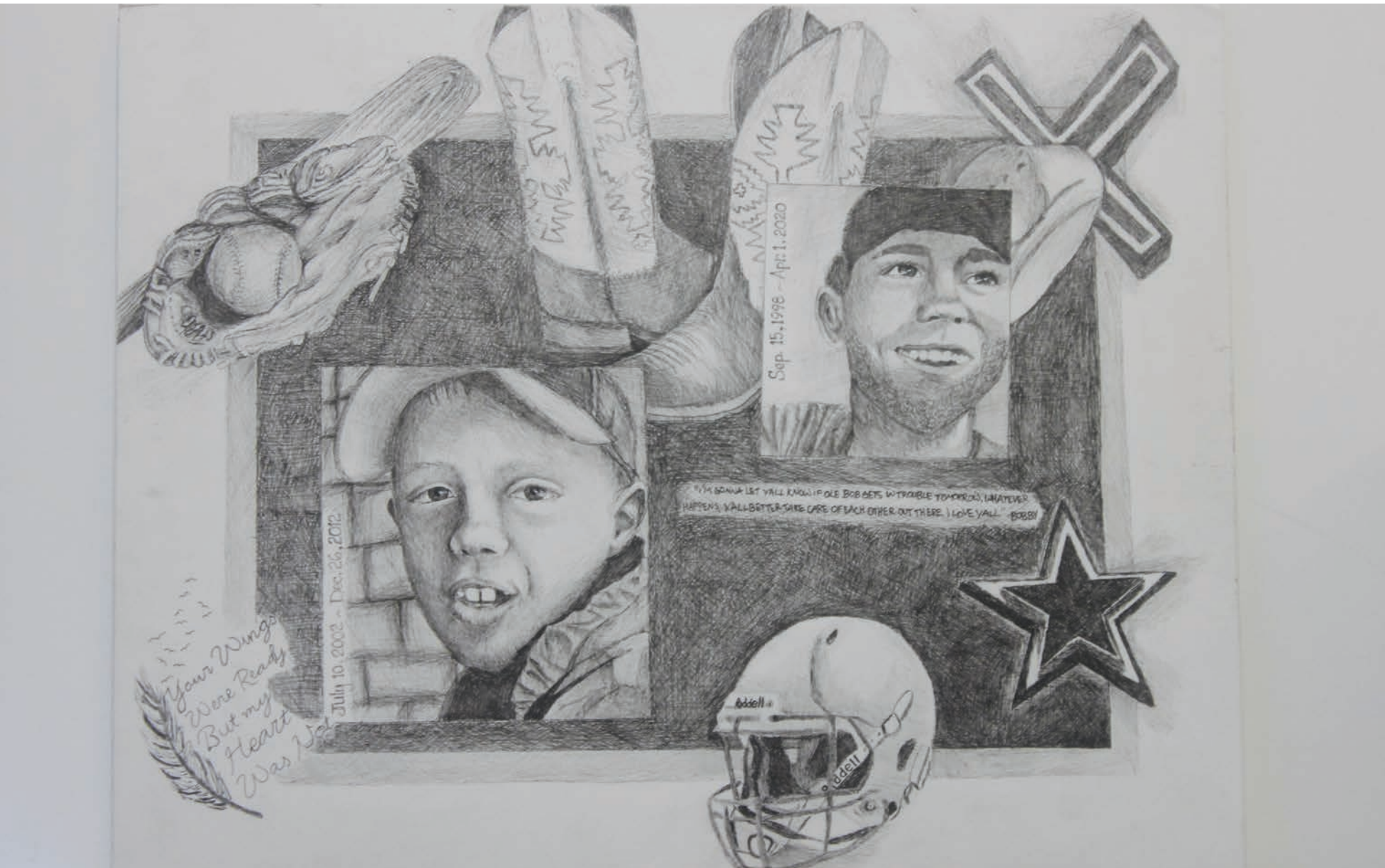
the voices feeding me songs to sing,

melodies to dance to,

stories to tell.



SELF-PORTRAITS, MALLORIE METZGER / JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 11



REMEMBRANCE, ERICA AMELUNKE / JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 11

Evil Queen Poem

by Riley Adams

JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 9

Listen well, and I'll tell you a story,
but take note, my darlings, it's a wee bit gory.
Innocence, Heartache, and Treachery, oh, my.
What is truth, and what is lie?
In this tale of vengeance and woe,
foe may be friend, and friend may be foe.
Who will survive, who will fall?
Who will shatter like a porcelain doll?
Put your heart back together, my sweet.
It's time to rise up, there are answers to seek.
Dry your tears, and march ahead.
You can rest when you are dead.
Fee-Fi-Fo-FUN,
I smell the blood of a broken one.

A welcome home, the stuff of dreams.
Of course, nothing is ever as it seems.
You can rest awhile, or you can fret.
Either way, your future is set.
The worst is done. Let's have some fun.
For all the warnings you failed to heed,
prick your heart, and let it bleed.
Run, run, they're on your trail.
If you get caught, you will face hell.
In battle, stay calm, be smart.
Expect losses and a broken heart.
One battle is done, but another looms.
Who walks away, who greets their doom?

In life, there are risks you must take,
and desires you should not slake.
The worst has happened, every path a disaster.
Behold! Destruction has become your master.
Fight the good fight with everything you've got,
or even your smallest efforts will be for naught.
True love's kiss can break any curse ...
or make your life ever so much worse.
Your dreams have come true.
Why are you so blue?
If warning sounds deep in your soul,
Pay it heed, or pay the toll.

Secrets are there, yours for the taking.
Please be careful, the beast is waking.
Hurting others comes with a great cost.
Piece after piece of your heart, until you are lost.
Time is of the essence and quickly running out.

Fight, fight, fight, and ditch the overgrown lout.
The deeper you wade into trouble,
the quicker your life becomes rubble.
Kiss me once, Kiss me twice,
I will be your favorite vice.
They say pride goes before every fall.
I say take someone with you — take them all.
A lock, a lie, an illusion of capture.
The real jailer is desire, oh, the rapture.

Storms might rage in your past,
but the temptest cannot last.
With this ring, I thee wed.
With this dagger, your blood runs red.
Leave him in the dust,
and his heart will rust.
Red wedding, stony heart ...
no longer will we be apart.
Just when you get bored,
in comes the horde.
It's time, it's time, the toll is due.
Pay up, pay up, and say adieu.
Tell the truth or tell a lie.
Are you ready to say goodbye?

Beware false hope and its lures.
Seek the truth and its cures.
Whether wrong or right,
you must have might.
What's done is done.
Fight until you've won.
What's theirs is yours.
Prepare for wars.
My wish, your command.
Your heart, my quicksand.
I welcome all ... to my thrall.

When all is lost, do not despair.
Dare to act, dare to care.
Death has come.
Who will succumb?
The time has come to pick a side,
for you will never bridge the great divide.
Mirror, mirror, on the wall.
Who will perish when I call?
The taste of vengeance is foul, not sweet.
If only you hadn't believed the deceit.



IRENE (GREEK FOR PEACE), ABBIGAIL NAES
CAMPBELL HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

hidden tears

by Elizabeth Ann Haas

STE. GENEVIEVE HIGH SCHOOL / GRADE 12

happy little girl —
full of laughter and cheer.

happy little girl —
who always sees daddy disappear.

happy little girl —
feeling responsible for her mother's tears.

happy little girl —
hides many secrets and has so much fear.

happy little girl isn't so happy after all.
look into her eyes and see the cage around her soul.

sad little girl —
crying to the night.

sad little girl —
so ready to give up the fight.

The Ferryman

by Braydon M. Motley

PRODIGY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY / GRADE 9

I was walking along the long, arching bridge that overlooked Farewell, a small and relatively poor town. I stopped at the middle of the bridge and thought to myself.

In this life, one small, indifferent one of many. I hadn't done anything good or meaningful. I had yet to marry, to get a job — of course, that was something I didn't necessarily need, considering the wealth I had obtained and kept in my last life.

I must sound odd, the way I speak of myself.

I suppose it wouldn't much matter, though, because I sit and write this in the mass of chaotic, cosmic muck. Water freezes into dirt here. That dirt melts into molten lava, where it sprouts a human head and proceeds to grow until it is a great city with towers and stone columns. The mass of obliterated DNA and genes that made up our universe now sit in aloof memory. Creating, destroying, recreating.

However, if that mysterious Creator that lives in between the in-between decides to organize the chaos into another world or universe or place. And this cosmic journal finds its way into intelligent hands. Then, I write about my life.

I never truly was born and never have died. I have always just been. Existed indifferently in the great scheme of things.

My life on Earth has had no meaning, not that I could see, and now lay in a pile of muck with the rest of the universe. But with all of my time to think, I have come to understand.

When I was living a very simple life, near the end of the 1800s in a place called Farwell, Missouri, (to continue where I had begun,) Farwell was mostly a town then, but grew as time went on. There, I came to understand the single thing that gave my existence meaning, and there is the place where all of this understanding begins.

I stood thinking on that white bridge that stood over a clear, bubbling river. I always thought this a queer river, because Missouri was always muddy, but this one had all rocks at its bed. You could see the small bass swimming indifferently in the water, catching small bass to eat in their meaningless, ill-moral life. There I was, thinking about my own existence. My own ultimate meaning and purpose for this world.

I brought people, whenever they left their bodies to decay underneath the cold soil, to a place where the road to the End was. I brought people from the Bay of Life, down a river in between, to a dock, that led to death. Or the ultimate End.

My name was Charon. It still is, I presume; not that it really matters.

But then, it was Charlie Aarons. Among the thousand names I had, this one meant the most to me, because this name was the person I was when this understanding struck.

Anyhow, I was thinking, when suddenly there was a shriek in the house to the right end of the bridge. I turned my head, a fair bit annoyed at the disturbance, and saw smoke billowing from the open window at the side of the house, facing me.

I wondered about a fire, and so I jogged down to the house, concerned.

There was no fire, only a girl, cooking, who was 22 at that time, only a year younger than myself. That is, if you're counting my age for that particular life. In my ultimate existence, I was a century away from 6,000 years old, but in 1891, I was only 23.

"Excuse me, Miss. Are you alright? Is there a fire?" I called in from the open window, avoiding the dissipating smoke.

"No." She replied simply. "I only burnt dinner. Oh, Lord," she said with a sigh.

"Perhaps you would allow me to cook for you," I half-joked. Still, the smoke was reviling in the house, doing its best to stay where it could be together. However, after only a moment, it dissipated fully, and for the first time, I saw the girl's face. How beautiful she was.

The girl's face was not too much angular to put you off, but not round enough to presume baby fat. She had green eyes and brown hair that was so stubbornly wavy the only way to wear it was to wear it down.

She looked at me with inquisitive eyes and a kind of grin that enchanted me. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

"You wish to cook for me?"

"Well, yes, considering you cannot cook for yourself," I said humorously, so she knew I was merely joking.

She laughed and said, "Well, you will have to make four servings; my father is quite fat. And a fair bit gluttonous to cakes." She said it with a smile, but keeping those inquisitive eyes that made me fall in love with her in that instant.

"Yes," I said, considering whether or not I should make this joke a reality, and then, my decision made, I said,

"Very well ... four servings ... I will be back by six." I began to turn, when she stopped me.

"Well, I must get your name first. Otherwise, you'd be a dangerous stranger, and my father would not allow you within 10 feet of this house."

She giggled to herself, and I responded, first with a humorous sigh, "My name is Charlie Aarons; I live atop the hill just Northwest of here. I live alone, no servants or even a dog. I must say, I am quite lonely sometimes."

I believe that was a desperate introduction, and by the way the girl looked at me, I believe she saw it, too.

"Well then, Mr. Charlie Aarons. You must eat with us; you are making us food so graciously, and you are lonely, so you will eat with us at six."

I wanted only to accept. So, with a slight bow, I hesitated, opened my mouth only slightly so as to appear to firstly object. Then, I said, "Very well, I will see you at six, with a roasted chicken and a sorting of vegetables." There, I left, to make a meal for the mysterious girl and her family.

I had always found it pleasurable to be polite and to do random, kind deeds for people such as this. This was merely one kind deed in a million. However, this was the deed that set the mystery girl in a state of love for me. However, merely for a time.

That night, I was invited graciously inside the Whites' house and introduced to Mrs. Mary Whites and Mr. Charles Whites. Indeed, a coincidence I thought was humorous: Mr. Whites and I shared the same name.

Anyhow, the mysterious girl I cooked for was named Ms. Emma Whites. A truly beautiful name for a truly beautiful girl.

We grew to be friends after that dinner, and we spent a significant amount of time together, painting and picnicking. We had a fascinating two years of friendship, and I believe, in those two years, we knew we loved one another. It was only a time in which we searched for a sign. A sign from who, I do not know, and for what, I'm not quite sure, either.

Three weeks into October marked the end of that two years of friendship. We sat on the hill outside of my house, a blanket strewn out with ellipse-shaped rocks holding it down. I looked at her with wanting eyes. She knew, of course. Just as she knew I wasn't some ordinary man or a man longing simply for the pleasures of life. It was that unexplainable life thing I was wanting, that for two decades too long I had gone without. That mysterious thing that gave me a mysterious meaning.

"Charlie ..." she said finally, with a sympathetic stare, different from the one that captured my heart. "... Charlie, I'm not ready. I want to live a little, without being held in the confines of marriage."

She was speaking as though my look had said it all. Of which it did, I admit. Emma was nearly more intelligible than myself. And I admit, oftentimes, I wondered (and still do) if she was a person who was never really born. If she was built in the great cosmic muck that I was built in, built by that mysterious person I have yet to understand.

"I understand," I said, at a loss for words.

"I hope I am not making a fool of myself," she responded presently, looking down at the checkered picnic blanket. "I love you, Charlie, but something feels so terribly menacing about marriage; I admit, I cannot explain it. I presume I am not fit."

She said it simply. I looked down at the blanket, too. Feeling a sudden wave of dejection and sickness, I realized then how terribly alone I was. How empty that space where my heart should be was. It seemed then, and for a long time after, that I would be stuck feeling that feeling of hopelessness that was no more grand than a graveyard.

"I understand, Emma; you need not worry about making a fool of yourself. I simply hoped my love for you was not vain, as it has been with others."

"No. Don't you say that. Foolish love is vain love. You are not foolish."

"Perhaps I am."

"I know you, Charlie, more than I believe anyone has ... A fool you are not."

It was that statement that made me question again if she was some goddess with omniscient powers far beyond that of my own. That made me question all of the moments she spent looking at me with that inquisitive stare. That stare brought me down a rabbit hole that begged a question of how much she could see in me. Perhaps I was an open diary she read any time she pleased; she seemed often enough to see that darkness in me that I befriended in this eternal job I was appointed. I walked with an air of death around me, and I believe she saw it and understood it. Something no one else had done before.

It made me want her all the more. But that, I could not have.

"I understand, Emma. Do not defend your arguments. I will be but a friend, and no more. If that is what you truly want."

She looked at me, nodded, and placed a beautifully soft, angelic hand over my own that had seen so much. There was a pain then, a nagging that told me to lean forward and kiss my dear friend. It was an ungently thing to think of, so I dismissed it, and sat there with her.

In the daytime in which we sat, I suddenly got an overwhelming smell of death. I wondered about Emma; still, she sat, however, and looked at me. It was not a stench that came from her, though it held scents of relation to Emma. I dismissed that, too, and stared into the capturing gaze of my dear friend.

That same night Emma had foretold my love for her, she discovered her father had fallen gravely ill with scarlet fever, so she told me. And I understood what that overwhelming stench of death was. That smell I had dismissed to be in the presence of Mr. Whites' daughter.

Three days later, I took my painting things to the Whites' home and sat in the bedroom with Emma's father and painted the very scene I saw outside his bedroom window. All the while, we conversed and discussed life and politics and books.

"Perhaps you could put Mrs. Whites just on the road there," Mr. Whites said, pointing to the sliver of road that was seen just outside the frame of the window sill I had painted.

"I believe that would look exceptionally well, Sir," I responded, and grabbed a blob of white-gray paint, so as to paint her dress.

"Do you perhaps know of any admirers of Emma? She is growing older and will need a husband before long," Mr. Whites said, to my painful dismay.

"I believe, Sir, I am her admirer," I said rather frankly, in a way that passed on a sense of rejection.

"Have you asked her to marry?" he asked, as though interested in gossip.

"I was going to, and your intelligent daughter read me as if I was a book. She knew what I wanted and said no. She told me she does not wish to be under the confines of marriage."

"Ahh ... I sensed that she had a dislike for marriage." He looked at my painting then, and seemed to get lost in that scene. I brought him out quickly, however, saying, "I will stay her friend, however, and perhaps one day convince her marriage is not such a terrible thing. Maybe she will find a suitor."

"You do not believe it will be you?" Mr. Whites said, almost angrily.

"No, I am afraid not; I am not a man who can fit her needs."

"Oh, nonsense!" He coughed then, and a wave of fatigue swept over him, bringing him from a reasonably well day, assuming recovery, down to a painful whisper.

"Listen, Son. She will see in time; do not give up that love for her. I do not want her to be with any man other than you. Do you understand?" I nodded, and continued to finish the last strokes of my painting.

I understood then Mr. Whites trusted me with his one and only daughter. And then I would understand I would from there on be their caretaker, as the stench of death rose in the air. That stench that is otherworldly, outside of what normal humans can perceive.

"Charlie, boy ... Heed my rambling once more," Mr. Whites said, and I listened. "When I go ... pass away, die, however you'd like to call it ..."

"Don't say that, Mr. Whites."

"Please, boy!" he rasped painfully. "I want you to take care of my wife and my daughter, as a friend. Emma will marry, and my wife will be a grandmother, as she is a mother. As a friend and a man, I want you to care for them, yes?"

I didn't want to exercise this man's delusions, this man's own drama in which he placed me caretaker of his family. However, he and I both knew he would die and move on into that other place. So, I conformed and said, "OK, but you mustn't believe you will die; have hope, my friend."

"And the very same for you. You mustn't think that because my daughter is painfully stubborn on such a silly, serious thing, there is no hope."

"But I am not —"

"Not what?" He rasped with such violence I assumed his heart would stop. A sudden, reeking sweet stench of ozone and sulfur wafted to my nose and dissipated whence he calmed. "I do not take you as a fool. So do not play one and argue. Do as I say."

"Very well," I said, defeated.

I admit, I was angry with him. For what reason, I still do

not know. Perhaps for not exercising my own delusions.

"And please, Charlie. Call me Charles. Mr. Whites is far too formal for how we know one another."

"Yes, Sir."

I left him to rest and be with his family then. I took my painting things and walked in the dark up to my own home. I bathed in a tub by a fire, dressed into my night-clothes and meditated. I do not sleep, nor eat for the need. I do not need most things others do. Food is merely a pleasure, sleep is something I cannot do.

So, I meditate. I sit on the floor, place my hands on my crossed legs and go to that place in between. That place where life and death meet.

There in the darkness of the great cosmic muck that resembled trees and a path that glistened silver and white, I stood. Waiting for the people to arrive at the dock. Waiting. I looked up above me. Above, there was pure and utter chaos. Glowing things turned to opaque and dark things. Grass melted into lava, which cooled into a hard sediment. Life and death battled there, causing a great booming sound over and over that was the collision of polar opposites. I waited there, and there turned up no one. No one paid the fee for passage that night. No two pence ever entered my money sack, tied around my waist. I stood there for a long time, before surrendering to the nothingness that was the ground, and I watched the chaos ensue above me.

I rose from my meditated state and made coffee for myself, enjoying that next morning as much as I could.

I admit, I was more than dejected at the rejection of Ms. Emma. I loved her dearly and wanted nothing more than her. Yet, here I was, waiting for the moment that was never assured to me, the moment Emma would realize her love for me and marry me. I was being told I would marry her one day, all I needed was patience. I couldn't have it, could not accept that. I do not know why, and I will never know why I felt such a way.

Days went by, and I spent all the more time with Charles and Emma, talking and painting and eating. They were a kind of family for me, and I relished that, never taking them for granted. As the time passed, Charles became more sick, the fever never ceasing its wrath.

Three weeks passed on slowly, as if Time reveled in Charles' pain. In Emma's and her mother's grief, in my hopelessness. It was a pitiful day, cold and rainy, thunder looming overhead.

The clouds were so very thick that day, the street lamps were lit and candles lit inside our houses. It was the type of weather I loved. I believed it was nature revealing a dark side of itself, hiding the sun, perhaps the greatest miracle of all. And letting the conscious beings know, ogres and all, that darkness, and everything that followed, existed. Even beings like me. Not a good person, yet not evil. It reminds me, and perhaps everyone, the world has no good people.

A pessimistic thought, but one I have come to understand in the millennia and millennia I have existed.

I apologize for the rabbit trail, yet who am I kidding? I write to no one.

I walked to the Whites' house under the cover of my umbrella, and as I neared, that great, cosmic smell of ozone and sulfur pressed my nose. Stronger than before, in those days I spent with Charles. Emma was outside, tears streaming endlessly down her smooth cheeks. She held a handkerchief in her hands and wailed.

"He is gone," I said, sitting beside her on the rocking chairs that sat on the porch. She nodded and let out another wail.

Late that day, after a considerable amount of mourning, I walked into the room where he lay, sleeping eternally. Two pence in hand, I placed them over his closed eyes. Standing there for a moment, I saw how pale his cheeks looked, that once, not too long ago, were bright red with fever. His thick, graying beard and balding head seemed so stale.

I was there in another moment. The great dark, cosmic place.

Charles — Mr. Whites — stood there in front of me, at the base of the dock staring up at the great chaos above him. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" I asked, announcing my presence.

"I've been waiting for you," he said, looking down and staring at me. "Hello, Charlie."

I cannot say I expected that to come out of his mouth. It was another of those mysteries still unanswered. It is not so important, however.

"Come along, I'll ride you downriver," I said, stepping

into the nothingness in particular that was some form of boat to the deceased spirit.

"You drive a tugboat?" he asked, stepping off deck and into the tugboat, which was what he saw.

"So that's what this is to you?" I asked myself, whispering quietly.

I do not remember what we talked about during that ride; however, he was in tears whenever he got off onto the deck, the deck that led to the ultimate end. His appearance was faded, like a transparent image, or a ghost, as looked all spirits who rode with me. However, his tears were clear, real as if conjured from the material world.

I remember saying my farewells, and in a moment, being back. Back in my body, gone for merely minutes.

"How are you, Mrs. Whites?" I asked, bringing coffee for her and Emma. We all sat in the drawing room. Mrs. Whites sat in Charles' chair, and I sat with Emma on one of two sofas, her hands in mine as she silently cried.

"Oh, I'm alright, just a little down." She sniffled through a stuffy nose, both their eyes quite red from crying. There was nothing much said after that. We stayed there nearly all night in one another's presence and cried together. I admit, that day was truly depressing. Though I believe I had a fair amount of depression in that time of



"I love you, Charlie," she said, rather harshly. "But I am fond of someone else, and ... well, I think I have always loved you, however, not in a romantic sense. I ... oh, I do not know what I am saying." She stopped walking and placed a hand over her eyes.

"I believe I understand," I said, keeping perfectly calm. My emotions were for later; I had then only need to keep my composure and not sound desperate.

"I do not know what to do, Charlie. I know you have always loved me. And you have been such a good friend, being so patient." She started to cry then, and we continued to walk until we were somewhere more private, for we began to get queer looks from those around us.

"Emma," I said slowly, "By the way it sounds, you do not wish to marry me. And that I can do no other than accept and be OK with. This man you just now speak of, if it is your wish for him to court you, then so be it. I cannot object."

"It is not fair to you. You deserve my taking your hand in marriage."

"I deserve no such thing," I exploded, speaking firmly, and rather irritated. Not at her rejection, but at her thought I deserved anything so great as her hand in marriage.

"Yes, you deserve that and much, much more. Your love and kindness and friendship to me and my family, your patience. I cannot do something so cruel as to reject you something you have well earned." Emma spoke in a hopeless tone, defeated and simply ready to accept the easiest path that was my taking her hand in marriage.

However, I could not allow it. She would not be happy; I knew it and accepted that. I accepted I would love her as a friend and watch her from a distance as she lived her life as a wife to another man, as a mother to his children.

"But you will. I only desire we stay as we are, friends. I will tell this man to court you and bug you until you accept his courtship, if need be. You won't sacrifice your happiness as a gift for my pitiful patience. Do you understand?"

She merely nodded. Angry, perhaps, I was not conforming to her wishes. The wishes that were the easiest to accept at that moment.

"How come I have never heard of this man before?" I asked, needing to know, for I truly had never heard of him.

"I met him two months ago, and we have been having tea together for some time, seldom going on walks. I was afraid you would become jealous," she choked out finally.

Moving back to the previous conversation, I asked, "So then, you accept what I am telling you?" She nodded in acquiesce. "Very well."

Something seemed to change in Emma that day. For weeks afterwards, after meeting this man and having an open courtship, she seemed only to become elated, joyful. (The man's name was Austen Gravesman, and he worked as a tailor.)

As weeks passed, she began to speak to me less and less. Falling in love with this man and forgetting me. I loved her still, for years to come. And I would always love her. However, I could not make her happy, not as this man could. As she came to accept what I had given her, she grew to forget me, and a year later, she married.

I was not invited, and I was only to be content with that. I had lived long enough waiting, with that mysterious thing called love in my heart. I spent those days pondering what love meant and what it was in the grand scheme of things. All I can say is, it is unexplainable. Magical. Mysterious. I had fallen in love with so many women, loved and married them, raised children and grown old with them. However, the one woman I loved most was kept away from me. I have been left, at the end of the world and universe, in this great chaos, to ponder why I was not able to be with my one true love. I believe perhaps I loved Emma so dearly that in my own acquiesce and dejection, I spared her a life of unhappiness and meaningless love. I believe I loved her so dearly I saw even though my love for her was great, I could not make her happy. I had told her that and did not mean it at first, nor did I understand it. However, it came to be true, and I do not regret sparing her that life. Truly, now. It has made me happy and given me peace in this chaos I spend eternity in. I was able to let her go, so she could have joy and true love.

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