

# The Nemadji Review

Volume 4

2015







# **The Nemadji Review**

**2014, Volume 3**

## *Editor-in-Chief*

Seth Love

## *Editor*

Katie Wolden

## *Editorial Staff*

Sydnee Chipman

Kelci Greenwood

Mara Martinson

Kourtney Sande

Rebekah Kromm

## *Faculty Advisors*

Jayson Iwen

Hilary Fezzey

John McCormick

All correspondence should be addressed to [thenemadjireview@gmail.com](mailto:thenemadjireview@gmail.com)

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## Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

It's a pleasure to present the fourth edition of *The Nemadji Review*. 2015 has been a good year for the editorial team, as we received a great response to our calls for creative work. Our inbox was filled with a diverse selection of poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, research writing, artwork, and photography.

We took our time with this year's selections. The journal is a reflection of the team's time spent editing, and the authors' efforts at creative expression. We are sure that our time has been well spent.

The editorial team would like to give thanks to all of the creative types that sent in the worthwhile results of their creative labor.

We hope will continue to showcase exemplary work from our area. We know that the journal will be in capable hands as the staff will continue all of their hard work in the years that follow.

The 2015 *Nemadji Review* represents a body of work that we of the editorial staff are honored to present.

Sincerely,

The Editorial Team

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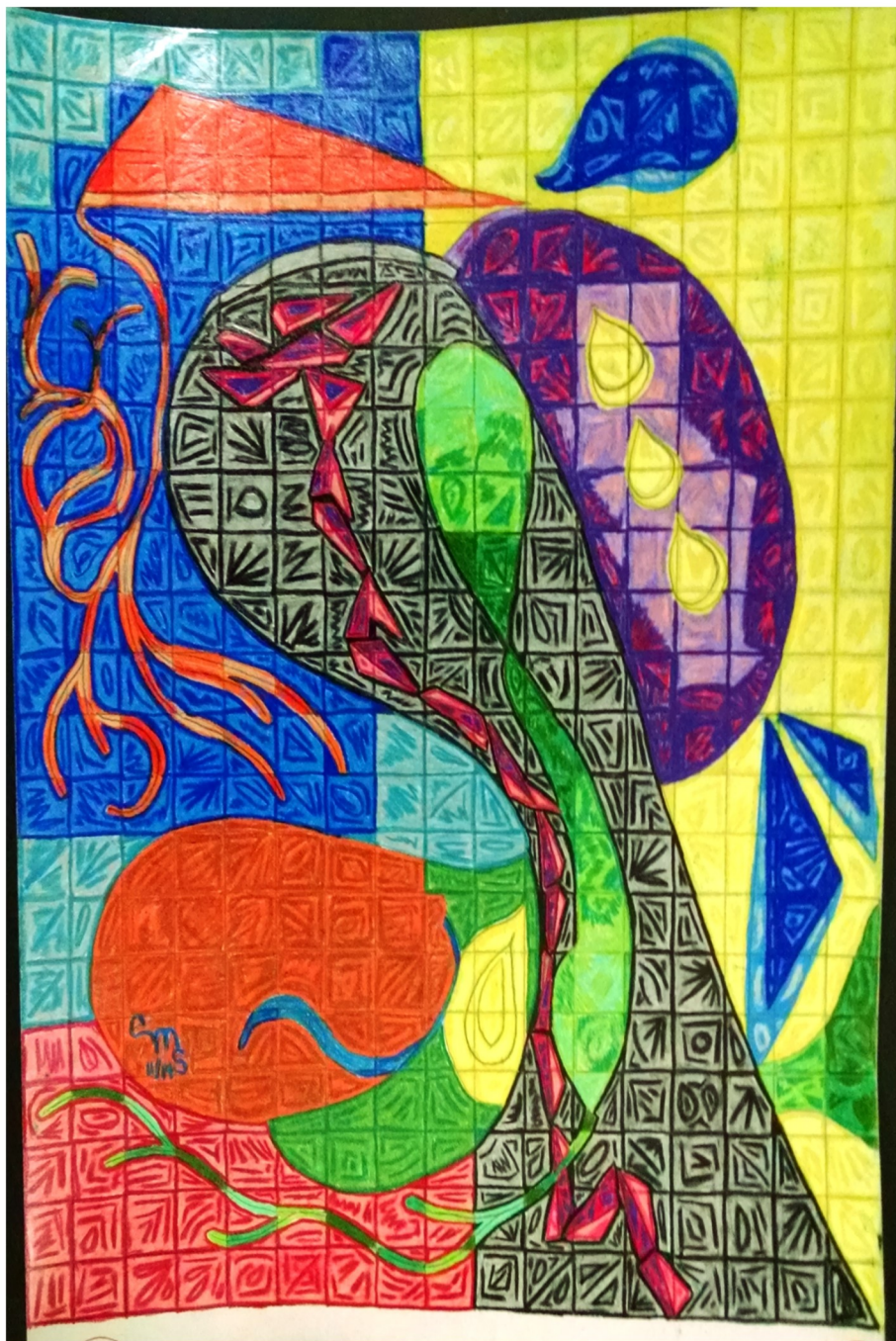
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## Robert Dewitt Adams

### “Burning”

Fire light flashes on the pines, while meteors burn to earth from above. The camp-fire murmurs to itself in new sounds, self-absorbed like a newborn, only minutes old and hungry, crackling here and popping there, sliding searing plasma tongues into hissing cavities and pockets of fire food. It's my baby and I'm proud of it. Minutes ago I'd seen the stars and set the tent and – how I wished I'd brought a beer. Just a can or bottle, something to further the otherness. A cigarette - anything. But now with the fire, I knew that was all I needed. The flickering magician that has entranced us for millennia. With a pot of canned stew sizzling and a bottle of irony hand-pumped water, this was enough.

Above, a million worlds and thousand spinning satellites intent on circumnavigation. A serpent's head and brothers locked in arms. A story of ages written in points of light in the sky. Luxurious warmth of the fire now glowing rich red, high-pitched tensile snaps, the chords of well-cured carbon becoming ash. Fires transfix whether in the firmament or below. I'm glad to stay with this one until it dies.

### “Mount Saint Helens”

Straight trunks disappear into branches,  
Lifting and falling with wet moss in warm currents.  
Insects spiral up in slanted light,  
Coaxing steam from dew-soaked bark  
And coloring spider strands,  
The morning net not yet cast.  
Tentative avian discussions begin, and I turn –  
From the once silent scene,  
Crunching up the pumiced path, crestward.



## “The Forest”

I see my mud-crusted shoes and smile, remembering my brother and the ancient forest. Muddy rut of a trail hidden in ferns, a few salmonberries and countless slugs. Huge trees still alive or shattered down hillsides, giant weight yet echoing dying thunder and crash. Ages tied together in moments, then gone.

## “Volcano Sundown”

Wind spins the hair around my head in the concrete parking lot shadow. Sunset silence at the ruined mountain. Still-bright sky blue, flung with spatters of white and pinkish grey. Sideways sun casts lines from stump to snag. Rubble-pumiced hills and silver-dead twig-trees; this is what the moon would look like if it were logged.

Green life grows in from the edges of devastation, toward the smoking gun crater and mud plains of the log raft lake. Hikers heave breaths without talk as they reach the ridge top, silhouetting themselves against a view only circling eagles have earned. They don't deserve it as they trample heedless past quietly pleading signs, to fly kites and laugh, crushing delicate landscape life as the darkness grows.

But we're surrounded now, by three more evening-red volcanic peaks, and I don't have time to judge or teach. I have to find a beautiful lonely place, and there to build a shelter and a fire.

## Julia Burhans

### “Colors in the Grey”

My soul wanders through phases

It seems, everyday

I get angry

I get sad

And it never goes away

Oh, to be happy and free

To always have a say

In my life

With my decisions

Why, it never goes that way

“You can’t do that” (yes I can)

But at the end of the day

I’m sitting here

With nothing new

Only continuous decay

Try something fun and exciting

That’s what they all say

Go to the movies

Go to the mall

Still, I only feel dismay

My heart is cut in two  
It can only reach halfway  
Let society take over  
Or, make a gigantic bird  
Out of paper mache

Why do what they say to do?  
Why not join the fray?  
Of people who are rebellious  
Never doing what they're told  
The bright colors in the grey

# Jan Chronister

## “Horticulture”

A friend gave me some seeds  
I planted just for fun.  
I was arrested  
for growing marijuana.

This was before computers  
down in Tallahassee.  
The record of my crime  
is filed away somewhere  
with my marriage license  
in the county courthouse.

I pleaded not guilty  
paid a hefty fine.  
I was never convicted  
but still hesitate  
when checking a box  
about my criminal behavior.

Back home in Wisconsin  
with a southern husband



## “Piercings”

I watch the ambulance scream  
up the long driveway  
crunching gravel. My mother  
wails. My four-year-old brother  
wears my sewing needle in his heel.

At the hospital it snaps  
during extraction. Bone-buried steel  
will go to his grave  
or melt into ash.

# Stacy Van Veen

## “The Power of Caring”

Freezing inferno and flaming ice sheet,  
Grasping, clawing, relentless in its hold;  
A slave to the bitterness of such heat,  
Ensnared by powerfully blazing cold:  
Thus to blinding passion I sell my soul.

Numbing breeze may not sooth my lungs’ burning,  
About my heart a coiled python wound;  
Ropes and chains of foolish human yearning  
Keep both my mind and logic tightly bound,  
And will until the day of Death Bell’s toll.

Acid is spat from my venomous lips,  
My hands caress every teardrop away;  
In the night I toss from fevered dream clips,  
And a fractured mask hides it all by day –  
All the while I wish to feel that I’m whole.

Empty even would be better than this:  
My emotions being torn asunder.  
A soaring eagle’s love with each success,  
Deathly raven’s hates with every blunder;  
‘Twould be easier as a gaping hole.

And yet, alas, I fill with frost and fire,  
Equal in their passion, burning soul-deep,  
Both fueled furiously by desire,  
Banishing indifference from their keep,  
And driving me unto the end goal.

# Jacob Victor Randa

## “Parents”

I Grew up in the West End:

Back Then,

I was too young to understand  
What separated me from my friends.  
I thought they all had parents like mine  
Who were constantly looking out for them.

But I was mistaken.  
& here I was, A Good Kid  
Navigating the ranks of misfits,  
delinquents, hooligans, & miscreants.

& I've played the role  
Of Backseat Accomplice.  
I remember nights spent  
Cruising down western streets,  
Vibing our heads to the latest beats,  
Dressed in black to blend into the darkness  
When we pulled over and got ready to creep.

Driver would pop the trunk  
To get the pellet gun out.  
I never pulled the trigger-  
Driver was pumpin rounds  
at house windows to blow off  
some of his internal anger.

& I heard plenty of car windows shatter  
When Passenger introduced them to a crowbar.  
& I never thought we were hard  
Running our asses off to the car  
After we egged the home  
Of my Sunday School Teacher.

& when I got home, my parents would ask how my night was,  
I'd wrap the truth in a white lie and reply,  
“We just played video games and stayed up all night and had fun.”  
While my stomach was doing somersaults

Fearing how disappointed they'd have been  
If the cops had shown up to bring me in.  
Without my parents,  
My life wouldn't be what it is.  
They've always wanted better for me,  
& have fought tooth and nail to see,  
That I got an education  
So that I can be the man I want to be.

Instead of being the man who limited his potential,  
By getting caught up in the dead ends  
That affect the lives of so many in West End.

& I'm aware of how much my parents have sacrificed for me.  
I'm aware of how hard my parents worked to protect me.  
I'm aware of how lucky I am to have parents like mine.  
I'm aware of how many of my friends parents left them behind.



# Ethan Freel

## “Debt of Daydreams”

The omnipresent dreams she carries  
Are like candy,  
Leaving a taste  
That begs invitation.

Solitude doesn't scare me  
Mirror the polarity,  
Something wasted  
Lost in her vacation.

Many moons passed  
Night eats day,  
So many words  
Nothing to say.

Blinded by the rain  
Became friends with pain,  
Spring arrived  
Grow in new ways.

You casted your spell  
I got in the way,  
She is heavier  
Than anything could weigh.

Birds for hands  
Concrete shoes,  
I fell in love  
With the idea of you.

## “Time is Water”

Time is water  
An ocean to some,  
For others, in a glass  
One drink and you're done.  
Where is time going?  
Nobody knows,  
Ride the waves  
Don't fight for control.

# Rebekah Kromm

## “Laying in a Blanketed Bed of Snow”

Snowflakes glisten  
The ambient frost permeates,  
Dull, steely clouds float above.  
Their frozen ice crystals ready to fall.  
They twirl, dance, swirl, they paint a surrealist portrait into my eager hazel eyes.  
Enveloped, they solicit.  
A portal into a new, free, fresh realm.  
Quiet like snow.  
Tread carefully, though, the fresh powder of snow-crystals do glimmer enticingly.

A sudden silence, a reprieve.  
All the days' worries have gone, fled, ceased to be a part of me.  
Once the spell of the snow-crystals begins to haunt and seep into my mind.  
I lay in the soft, infertile snow. I gently clasp a handful; it is a feather-light powder full of wonder.  
As I examine the snowflakes closer, I find a mystical mystery in their exotic, unique shape.  
A crescendo and forte play in my head as the wind billows the powder-snow from my grasp.  
I take another bundle and lick the cool, moist, wet snow. Icy water instantly quenches even my darkest, most sensual thirst.

Iceicles kabob from the nearby tree, gentle, fragile, each delicately woven by nature's competent hand.  
I lick more snow and marvel "How can this all be? The vast intricacies of this world and how it came to be. I am only a speck in this vast, pure white sea."  
The white, frozen sea of Hope,  
Death,  
and Dreams.  
I feel my cheeks begin to grow red, cold, and numb.  
I care not and eat some more frozen, tender snow.

I lay down in the blanketed bed of snow, staring at the swirling, congested clouds.  
I inhale, breathing in the fresh, perfect scent of crisp snow. I exhale, watching the smoky, sudden trail of carbon dioxide expel from my body.  
A frozen world, my world.  
I closed my eyes and a snowflake kissed my cheek as I drifted off to sleep.

## *Short Fiction*



Photograph by Leah Greenwood

## Xuan Chen

### “To My Best Friend”

Z had been dead for a week; but as her best friend, I was not allowed to attend her funeral.

I dump envelopes and paper into the iron trash bin, set them on fire, and open the window; I am watching the fire burn in my room. Outside it is a warm sunny day, but the warmth is never enough for me.

I put my hands near to the orange fire, and imagine touching it. A real fire might be warm enough to comfort my body. But soon, I find the imagination bores me. I walk to the window, find a seat nearby, and grab my cellphone and reread every message Z has sent to me. After she died, the phone is useless and I have to put it out of service, otherwise, strangers' phone call and message keep coming in, restlessly, day and night. Since then, I started to receive countless letters, blaming and threatening. It doesn't really matter, except it takes time to clean.

The fire in the trash bin finally dies. My room is full of smoke; too many letters needed to be burned. I grab the bin outside of the window; my hands are hurt due to its hot temperature. I complain about the stupid trash bin, and stay beside the window.

I look into the blue sky—*This is really a beautiful day.*

I pull out the last message Z sent to me on the phone:

*Moon, let's go shopping tomorrow! There is a new clothing store opening. Nice! Nice!*

*P.S. Meet by the pond, 5p.m.*

*Nice. . . Nice. . . I have read this message million times. The words pop in my mind sometimes even when I don't look at them. I feel they dig a hole, cold and deep, in my heart, and I am bleeding. I am bleeding with unexpected joy.*

A knock on my door interrupts my thinking.

“Moon, come downstairs, breakfast is ready.” I hear Mom's voice, it sounds like I am at the bottom of a well, and she is throwing a rope down while talking to me. I am hesitating putting my phone away.

Downstairs, Mom is putting the breakfast on the dining table, and Dad is talking on the phone. I see his face gradually turning red and then purple; he seems to try hard enough to keep silent. But after a while, like an eruption of a volcano, he shouts out loud on the phone, “It is not our fault!” A fork drops down from Mom's hand; she stands too close to Dad when he yelled.

“Can't you just lower your voice? Don't you think what our neighbors say about us is not enough? They are...” I can't hear what Mom is saying when she grabs the fork. She didn't even look to anybody and then directly walks to the kitchen.

She always suspects and worries about this and that, but actually nobody real-

This man's whole misfortune was and is me, his 17 year old, "You'd better never go out to make me ashamed!" This was what the man usually yelled at me. But after Z died, he never sees me in his eyes. I bet he would like to kill me if he is allowed, erase the taint, me, who almost destroyed his whole perfect life.

I don't really care, to be honest. Z used to tell me, "Moon, you don't have to make everyone like you. If you like yourself, what do others matter?" Z's sweet smile appears in the air, and I can see it like she never left.

It was a hot summer afternoon. I stood by the pond and waited for Z. I could hear cicadas while I stared at the sky. It gradually turned to dark blue, and near to the sunset, clouds were vivid orange. No wind, no people or cars passed by the road where I stood aside. But I felt like something was hiding behind me, in the grass, trees, and in the pond, and it was moving.

I was there in time but Z didn't show up. She usually came late, and there was no way to predict how late she would be, so I had to wait there like a stupid street sign, and I was sweating.

*She better buy me an ice cream... I thought.*

Shortly, my phone was ringing. It was Z's phone number. I was thinking about what kind of ice cream I wanted and tried to pretend that I was angry about her being late, and then I picked up the phone.

Someone was talking on the other side of the phone, but it was not Z. It was a young man. I kept listening and stayed quiet.

The wind blew, and it brought an incredibly cool breeze.

I gradually shifted my mind to listen to the wind blowing and cicadas singing. The phone was still on, but it no longer mattered.

The sun completely disappeared in the remote mountain. I put my phone into my pocket. I finally decided that I was going to buy a strawberry ice cream. I had to tell Z that. I had to find her.

I walked to the direction that the young man told me. I walked for a while, but then I realized that this could be a very long journey, so I started to run. I ran fast, branches broke my dress, and then sliced my skin.

My arm was bleeding, but I felt no pain. I just kept running to the opposite side to where I stood before.

I kept running until I found a large group of people talking loudly with very serious faces by the pond. I wanted to ask them where was Z, but words didn't come out. My throat was dry and felt it was burning. I gave up asking and started running again until I found Z's boyfriend in the crowd.

I slowed down, and walked to him, and beside him, I finally found Z.

She was lying on the ground with her beautiful eyes widely opened. I could see tears on her pretty cheek. Her face looked like a pink bud, which was going to bloom soon, but it was muddled. Z lay on the grass, dressed up as a cute doll, if only her clothes were still undamaged and clean.

"Why didn't you find her?" said Z's boyfriend, in a very deep and empty

voice, the same voice that gave me the direction of finding Z on the phone. I saw his eyes were out-of-focus. I knelt down beside Z's body, and put her hand in my hands. I could think of nothing but only the ice cream.

The man finally killed her and left. Fifteen minutes later, a farmer, who worked two blocks away, was asked by the man who was looking for a place to wash his hands and his white shirt had some rosy taints. The farmer reported it to the police office. People found him and Z in the next thirty minutes. At that time, Z's boyfriend was passing by and heard about the news, so he went to the pond. I never left there, but faced the other side, enjoyed the sunset, and thought of my ice cream while Z was looking at my back and was attacked—I was so close to her, but for that moment, I think, if I could just walk away, she might hurt less.

## Kelci Greenwood

### “Hostage”

It was a beautiful night outside, she decided as she finished loading up her groceries. She should have done the shopping hours ago, but she'd always been a procrastinator. The sky had long since turned black, but the moon had yet to rise, leaving the parking lot only dimly lit in the darkness by a few out-of-date light posts. Upon entering her rusted '97 Ford Escort, a large knife was pressed against her throat.

“Drive,” the assailant commanded from the passenger seat.

“Where?”

“I'll let you know when we're on our way.” It probably wasn't a smart idea, asking, but she'd gotten an answer, and she hadn't been killed. She fumbled to get the key into the ignition. Then, once she had, she quietly backed out of her parking space and drove away from the store. “Turn left here, then turn onto Abington Street, and follow that all the way out of town. Don't try anything funny or I'll slit your pretty little throat.”

“Okay,” she replied with a nod, doing exactly as she was told. As they drove, her unnamed attacker dug through her purse with his free hand. He tossed her cell phone out the window and pulled her license from her wallet for close examination.

“Sarah Jorden. That's a lot of meat you've got, Sarah Jorden.” He was referring to the plastic bags in the backseat which were overflowing with packages of raw hamburger.

“It's a big night,” she explained calmly.

“Yeah, you're gonna miss that.”

“I don't really have a choice.” He shook his head with a maniacal grin.

“No, you don't.” After a good half-hour on the road, they came upon an old, run-down barn. “Pull in there.”

“Are you sure? I mean, it looks like it could cave in at any moment. Not a proper hiding place if you ask me.”

“I didn't ask you! Now do it or you're dead.” He pressed the knife harder against her throat but didn't draw any blood.

“Okay, okay.” When she parked, he forced Sarah out of the car and tied her hands behind her back. He then walked her into the barn and threw her down on a rotting hay bale to tie up her ankles, as well. “So, what exactly are we doing here?”

“We're here to play a little game.” He laughed crazily. “Well, you're going to play. I'll be acting as judge.”

“What kind of game?”



"It's simple. You have ten minutes to tell me why I shouldn't kill you. When the ten minutes are up, if I don't like what I hear, I start taking you apart, piece by piece. Maybe I'll start with an ear." He gently dragged the knife down the side of her face. "Or maybe your tongue."

After a moment of thought, Sarah spoke up.

"Well, let's be logical here. Why would you want to kill me?" He chuckled in reply.

"I've been doing this for years. What makes you think you're special?" She shrugged as well as she could while bound.

"Well, my mom always did tell me I was special." She noticed the man's agitation at her words. "Ah. Bad mother experience?"

"She was a whore!" He snarled. "She got what she deserved."

"So you prey on women who remind you of her. She abused you, made you feel small and weak, and now you want to feel powerful. I get that. Although, I think your methods are a bit confused."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He didn't seem angry, just perhaps a bit affronted.

"Well, in your attempt to get away from the thing that you hate, you sort of...became it."

"And what exactly do you suggest I do instead?"

"You could always untie me." He let out another bark of insane laughter.

"If I untie you, you'll leave."

"You're probably right. In fact, I'd run screaming from the building. It's not you. I just have a thing about knives."

"I like you," he told her with a crooked smile. "But that alone's not gonna save you. Way out here, no one'll hear you scream."

"There's always my car. It is right outside."

"And I have the keys. You'd have to take them from me." Instead of responding, Sarah looked up through the hole in the roof at the sky. The stars were finally becoming visible.

"I have a feeling it's going to be a lovely sunrise," she said after several minutes of silence.

"You'd better keep talking if you want to see it." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Except that...I really don't think you plan to let me."

"That depends on you."

"No. It really doesn't. Why am I not blindfolded? Why aren't you wearing a mask? I've seen your face. I could identify you if you let me go. So either you're incredibly stupid and just don't know what you're doing – which I doubt considering all that I've seen and heard and how long you've supposedly been doing this –

or you never had any intention of allowing me to live.”

“Oh, don’t be so pessimistic.”

“Realistic, not pessimistic.” She looked to the sky again and smiled but said no more. He watched her with a grin of his own which gradually widened as the moments passed. Eventually, he broke the silence, bringing ominous news.

“Time’s up. You were doing so well at first, but now...” he clucked his tongue. “I’m actually disappointed; you just haven’t done a good enough job of convincing me.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to convince you. I’m waiting.” His gleeful expression suddenly fell, and he scoffed.

“The police will never get here in time. Chances are, they don’t even know you’re missing.” It was Sarah’s turn to laugh.

“I’m not waiting for the police, you silly boy. I’m waiting for the full moon. You see, I’m a werewolf, and I’m going to eat you.”

He was right; no one could hear the screams.

# Crysta James

## “Photograph”

The thin, red-haired woman stood silently on a street corner. The place she was at was a busy intersection, with those who passed by in a rush to get to their destinations, all of them talking away on their phones, slipping past her without a glance or notice. They had no idea who she was, and not one of them stopped to find out. She was just another stranger.

Anyone who would have stopped to look at her would have noticed a few different things about her. Her eyes, looked to be green, but they had no sparkle, and were dull and empty. Her hair fell around her in gentle curls that had not been brushed, and ends that tangled just slightly. Her face was thin, and her skin pale; she looked sickly. Her clothes presentable to most consisted of black jeans tucked in to black boots, and her shirt was red, hung a little loose, and seemed to be a bit worn out. The jacket over the top looked like it had one day been rather fancy, something to have shown status, and now, not so much. It was black with a scarlet accenting here and there and it just like her, was tired and worn.

The most significant part about this woman wasn't something she was wearing; it was something else. Something that she was holding in her hand. A photograph. An old and worn out photo, one that looked as though it had spent days or even years in a pocket or purse, it was faded, the edges soft and feathered, and creased in places but carefully, so that the faces wouldn't be ruined.

The photo was an image of the woman and she looked much happier and healthier, her eyes sparkling with warmth and love. Her arms wrapped around a child who could have been no more than two. A boy actually, with red hair and smart green eyes, her son, not that anyone had stopped to ask.

Glancing down at the photo, she stepped out into the crowd, and blended in, heading on her way to an unknown destination. But along with the photograph, this woman carried a sense of sadness, the kind of sadness that very few people would know.

\*\*\*

The truth was that this woman had given everything she had in an attempt to save her child, the baby boy in her eyes. She had sold everything, her house, her car, her clothes; she had gone as far as to beg for money from strangers in a vain attempt to give the child everything he had needed. Sadly this hadn't worked, and the boy, who had been very ill, passed. With no word from his father, she had scraped together the funds to give the child a respectable, burial. She had failed miserably at her one single responsibility, to raise and care for her only child and her only son.

The woman came to stop outside of a park, the wide iron gates held open to the public for the day. Surrounded by a tall stone fence, it was a safe place to be, and nearly every day she came here, sitting on a bench that overlooked the small pond

that sat near the center, fed clean water by a small stream that somehow managed to make its way through town nearly uninterrupted. Quietly she looked to the photograph, and slipped it in to her pocket after a few moments of silence.

At this moment she rested and just observed, never breaking eye contact with the glassy surface of the pond that stood before her. Not even when a man came to sit next to her, "My dear, how are you today?"

The elderly gentleman wore a fedora, and carried a cane which he left leaning next against the bench as he situated himself. His hands slid into the pockets of his trench coat. He looked to her, and they appeared to be friends, or at least that was what he thought of their relationship.

"I'm fine." She didn't smile but she did glance at him, looking him over once before looking back to the pond. The surface now rippling as a few ducks entered the water from near by. "Same as always."

"It's never the same as always." He looked the pond for a moment, "Every day it's a little worse than always." He looked to her. "Where do you go all afternoon? All evening?" He really did sound concerned for the woman.

"Around." She looked down to the ground and swallowed and stayed silent.

"Where?" He looked to her "Around isn't a place you know." He gave her a nudge and sighed softly.

"Nowhere in particular." She faked a smile and looked over at him and shrugged for a moment. She reached in to her pocket and pulled out the photo for a moment, running her thumb over the face of the little boy.

"You know what would help you the most?" He looked over at her as he played with her photo.

"I can't do that." She looked over at him and gripped the photo tightly. "It's the only thing I have left."

"It's not, though." He looked to her. "You have your memories of him. You will never lose that; he will always be in your mind and in your heart."

"I don't want to forget him. I'm afraid I'll forget him." Tears threatened to rise out of her eyes, and she blinked to try and make them stop.

"You will never forget your child. I don't see how you can, just remember the times that you had together, and even some of the bad ones. You will never be able to forget him."

"I don't know. I don't think I can do it." She looked to him, and slowly got to her feet, "Look I have to go for a little while."

"Alright." He looked to her and nodded, "I'll be here tomorrow." He smiled softly and waved goodbye to her.

"Bye."

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The woman went back to the place she had been staying, a seedy little hotel with an owner too busy dealing with her own problems too actually go around and collect rent. She pulled out her little photograph and look to her son. The boy looked just like her, and had absolutely loved her, there was no doubt that the child wanted nothing more than to be with his mother, and to be loved by her. Slowly she let her mind drift back to when he was with her, one of the many conversations they had before he went to bed.

"Momma, where is daddy?" His voice was so small and innocent, and curious.

"I don't know." She looked to him as she tucked in his blankets and gave him his favorite bear to cuddle with, "Your daddy loves you, but he had to go away to work, and his work takes him very far away for a very long time."

"And you don't know where he is?"

"I don't." She looked to him, "His work makes him move lots, and sometimes he forgets to tell mommy where he's at." That was a lie. The boy's father just never said anything to her, he had left her when she'd become pregnant because she had refused to terminate it. And because that didn't fit his lifestyle, she was on her own with the boy. She didn't have the money to go after him for child support, and part of her didn't want any.

"Do you miss him?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you love him?"

"Not as much as I love you." She smiled to her son now and kissed his forehead, "Now, you better get to sleep before the boogiemán gets you." She smiled more now as he squealed and pulled the blankets over his head falling in to a laughing fit.

"There's no boogiemán!"

"Oh I don't know, I've seen him creeping up on children that don't go to bed.." She giggled a bit and pulled the blankets off his face, watching him carefully as he closed his eyes, "Good baby, I'll come wake you in the morning."

"G'night mommy." The boy drifted off into sleep.

Waking from this dream, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She missed her child horribly, and it was these moments that made her want her child even more. She feared that her ability to keep these memories would fade without the photo. But then again, the man was right, and this was holding her back on some level. She just wasn't ready to admit that yet.

She fell asleep weighing in on these options, and she just didn't know what to do yet. She couldn't make up her mind on what felt right not yet.

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The old man's name was actually Victor. And he had found that young woman, all sad and on her own on the bench that he had dedicated to the park in memory of his wife. He had felt a connection with her. And he could understand the pain that she was going through; it wasn't easy losing a wife, and yet alone losing a child. Slowly he had watched his eldest daughter suffer after a car accident, and die three days later. A month after this happened his wife had deteriorated to the point that she had just given up and it was over.

He wanted to help the girl, to save her from the same pain that he had gone through with his wife. And the woman was headed down that path rather quickly, and she just didn't have the desire to fix it on her own. That's why he had proposed to her the idea to put the photograph away, to burn it or bury it, something significant so she couldn't get it back. So she would have to let it go and move past it.

Over the next several days, he met the woman at his wife's bench and talked to her, discussing the photos and letting her share her memories of her son, and over several days he noticed something in her. She held the photo less, and the spark in her eyes reappeared. He hoped, on some level, that she was ready to let it go, but never did he push her, only support her thoughts on it, and offer a gentle opinion and stories on how he had dealt with the death of his child, of his wife. He loved her like a child, and only wanted the best for her. He didn't want her to suffer any longer.

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The woman waited for him at the bench one day. She looked different, and she carried herself a little differently as well. She looked like a newer woman, refreshed. Alive. Sitting on the bench there she continued to look around for the man to show up. Her hair was combed and untangled, neater than it had been the previous days. Her eyes had changed a little bit too. They had a sparkle in it that had been missing since the day her child had died.

"You look like a new woman." The man approached from behind and once again came around and eased himself down in to the bench adjusting himself just so, cane leaning against the bench fedora moved from his head, and down on to his knee.

"I thought about of what you've been saying." She looked to him and offered a little smile.

"And?"

"And I think you're right." She looked to him and pulled out the photo. Folding it just so and holding on to it tightly, "I think I'm ready to let go." She couldn't help but to smile to him.

"That's such a good thing." He smiled and encouraged her now. "Have you decided on what you're going to do with it?"

"I think I'm going to put it some place special." She looked to him and smiled a little and stood up with confidence. She trembled as she walked across the path and down near the pond. The ducks that swam near them scattered in different directions and she knelt down, moving a few stones that rested near the pond's edge. She placed the photograph under one of them and carefully covered it up; her last memory of her boy would be in a beautiful place, a place she visited every day, a perfect place for his memory to be.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do anymore for you, baby boy." She looked up over the pond, in this quite and safe little park, the kind of place she would have wanted to bring him to play and explore.

"How do you feel?" Victor was standing behind her, leaning on his cane slightly, his hand on her shoulder supporting her.

"Better." She smiled at him a little. "Thank you so much for everything that you've done for me. No one has ever helped me this much."

"I'm happy I can help you." He smiled down for a moment, and seemed to be in thought "And if you want a place to stay while you recover and get back on your feet, you are more than welcome to stay with me and work for me. I could use the extra hands." He wanted to continue to help her, he felt like she could use the guidance, and he could really use the help. He thought of her like a daughter now and wanted only the best for her.

"Okay." She smiled at him, "I think I would be okay with that." Together they walked off through the park and in to the city, and this time as she vanished in to the crowd, she was a changed woman now. People looked to her, smiled and greeted her, and she felt different, no longer a shadow of a woman.

## Kaylie Knase

### “Pretty Girl at the Fancy Party”

I need to get out of here. Smiling faces beam at me, eyes hollow like my empty cigarette case. The music is too loud; it's always just a bit too loud, and I have got to get the hell out of here. I turn in a circle, scanning the crowd through vision that blurs in and out with the pounding of my anxious heart. I don't see him though, and I'm sure if I had the energy to explore this beautiful, Victorian home, I would find him wrapped around a white body, itself wrapped inside a lilac scrap of fabric and a necklace that drapes down to her navel. He probably has that pendant in his mouth.

I need to vomit. I need to scream or cry, or be in a space where I can safely do or not do those things.

A man comes up behind me and touches my back. I'm one drink past the ability to startle, so I lazily curve my torso around to look at him. He is handsome enough and is attempting to look concerned.

“I've got my dad's car for the night, and a few of us are heading across town. You should come along,” he says. “You look like shit.”

I should come along. We make our way to the stairs, he with his hand on my elbow. I'm sure I'll see that hand in darker places later. I can see myself leaping off the landing and flying wide-eyed two stories to the cool marble, bones in pieces, head open like a melon. Lacy dress stained, expensive heels broken.

I put one foot daintily in front of the other, and nod at Has His Dad's Car while he discusses his dreams of becoming a punk rocker. His hands are manicured.

Later, in the borrowed BMW, I slip my seatbelt on. He chuckles, as if he knows that the dollars that bought this car will also guarantee our safety. He doesn't see what I see. I watch as the whiskey in his bloodstream takes control of his pretty hands and steers us just far enough over the center line to clip the fender of a driver delivering his last load of hydrogen for the day. Or the last load of his life. My new boy doesn't see a raging inferno and the way his smooth, white skull looks after the flesh decides to leave it in favor of wind and sky.

We pull up beside a Chinese restaurant with a crooked door and neon flickering – that light is going to give someone a stroke someday.

We're all going to stroke out, break down, burn up someday, but for now, for tonight, another human being sees me. And I am going to stick around, I think.



# Amy Leffel

## “Fading Light”

Laura sits by herself in the empty waiting room of the nursing home. She rubs the leather-bound book in front of her but does not open it. Her watery blue eyes flicker around the room. Searching. She worries the frayed corner of the book. Laura jumps when a door bangs shut down the hall. Turning towards the door she looks hopefully at it. Will it open?

Down the road from Laura’s new home, Ashley sits at a red light. The car is shiny and bright, which is a stark contrast to the scowling woman sitting in the driver’s seat. Everything seems to be going wrong in her life. Derrick had moved his things out of their house this morning. Maggie their eleven-year-old is constantly getting served with detention. Aaron has begun wetting the bed and at seven he is much too old for this. Mackenzie is turning into a biter at daycare. Ashley was called into the boss’s office for an evaluation that had not gone well. Her life is falling apart because the light was slowly going out of it.

The thought of going to see her mother was not at all appealing. She wished she could skip the visit all together. Ashley knew she wouldn’t, though, and that is why she turned right when the light turned green. Laura was waiting for her to come and visit. Ashley could live with the disappointment of what her life had become. What Ashley couldn’t live with was disappointing Laura over and over again.

“Ow,” Ashley snaps as Maggie’s foot makes contact with the back of her seat. She glares at her in the review mirror. Barely out of elementary school, yet Maggie already has a bad attitude. She kicks the seat again, staring into the mirror right back at her mother. Sitting next to her, Mackenzie shakes her Sippy cup and giggles. Aaron stares out the window. Ashley says, “Come on guys, it won’t be that bad.”

Maggie heaves a heavy sigh and Aaron’s little face is sullen. Mackenzie just continues to giggle. Ashley echo’s her daughter’s sigh. Normally, Derrick would take the children when Ashley went to see Laura. It was easier that way. That was no longer an option, however. Ashley for saw this visit ending with Maggie crying, Aaron more sullen and Mackenzie still shaking her Sippy cup. No, she would rather skip this visit.

“All right guys, you win,” she says, reaching for her phone in the front dash board. She pushes the number and waits for the person to answer. “Hello, this is Ashley Carter. I’m calling to inform you that I won’t be coming today. Yes that’s right. Thank you!”

Looking in the mirror Ashley views her children. Aaron and Mackenzie have not changed since they got into the car, but Maggie has. She stares at her mother with a look of accusation on her face. However, she says nothing, but they both

know what she is thinking. Laura is going to be frantic. Ashley decides to ignore Maggie anyway. Ashley turns the car towards home. After all, Laura will be there. Laura will always be there. It's not like her mother will notice if they come or not. Not really anyway. It has been a long time since Laura has taken any notice of any of them.

Laura spent her life in the midst of books. The head librarian of the largest library in their area, Ashley has spent just as much time as her mother among the shelves. Sitting in the large stuffed chair in the back on the top floor was where Laura always found her. Curled up with some book Ashley could barely read. Mother and daughter would sit together. Ashley would read and then Laura would explain. Never once had Laura told her daughter to pick something easier.

Back in the waiting room, Laura stares at the door. She waits quietly as she always does for her visitors. The door opens, but it is not who she is looking for, but then again Laura doesn't remember who it is she is looking for. She figures she will know them when they come.

"Well, Mrs. Carver, I'm sorry to say that your family isn't coming today. Something came up and they can't make it," the woman says as she stands in front of Laura. The older woman tilts her head around the nurse so she can see the door better. "Mrs. Carver do you understand what I just told you?"

The woman's voice is soft, but Laura continues to stare at the door. She rubs her book and finally looks at the blond woman in front of her. Tears fill Laura's eyes.

"Why aren't they coming?" she asks.

"I don't know sweetie. Now what have we here?" The starch in the woman's uniform crinkles as she sits down in the chair that Ashley would normally sit in. She gently touches the corner of the book "May I see?"

Laura pushes it towards her but does not look at her. Her pale blue eyes have returned to the doors. The woman opens the pages of the book to discover a photo album filled with pictures and notes. All the memories of Laura's life dance in front of the nurse's eyes. Ashley sitting in a highchair with chocolate cake on her face a first birthday banner above her head. Laura and Frank dancing at their anniversary party the week before he passed. Laura helping Ashley get into her wedding dress. Derrick laughing next to a Christmas tree. Three small children laying in some leaves. Maggie flashing a smile after winning a track race. Aaron jumping off a raft. Laura holding Mackenzie right after she was born. The pages went on and on. Filled with the love and laughter that Laura no longer remembers.

"Mrs. Carver, thank you for letting me look at your family," the nurse whispers.

"Whose family?" Laura asks.

"Yours. These pictures are lovely."

"Oh that's not my family. That was on the table when I came in." Laura says. "When will my guests be arriving? I've been waiting an awful long time."

"Let me go check Mrs. Carver." The nurse gently pats the old woman's shoulder and leaves the room. Laura isn't wrong. Ashley had asked if the nurses would give the photo album to Laura just to see if it would help. They had set it on the table for her to look at while she waited for her family to arrive. The nurses doubted that even if she had opened it that Laura would have recognized any of them. The Alzheimer's was just too far along.

When Maggie was born, Laura retired from the library to take care of her while Ashley and Derrick were at work. She had moved in with them after Aaron was born. She had happily laughed each time Ashley announced she was expecting. The children had no other caretaker. Often Ashley worried that Laura would be overwhelmed by the children, but it wasn't until a year ago that Laura started to slip. At first it was just little things, like forgetting to put fabric softener in the wash. Derrick would joke that he was going to chafe. Then more serious issues began to arise. Laura started forgetting to turn off the water or the stove. Ashley and Derrick knew that Laura was getting sick but they decided to leave it be. That is until Laura walked into traffic one day. This is when they began looking for a nice nursing home for her to live in. Maggie never forgave them for taking her away from their home.

The nurse returns carrying the phone with her. She has called Ashley to inform her that while Laura does not know who she is waiting for she is still waiting. It would be best if Ashley told her that she was not coming herself. This is exactly what Ashley wanted to avoid. She now had to explain once more that her marriage has failed. Over and over again she must reopen this wound so that her mother understands something she never will. The nurse hands Laura the phone but the puzzled look on old woman's face makes her laugh. Gently the nurse puts the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" Ashley says. "Mom, are you there?"

"Say hello Mrs. Carver," the nurse prompts keeping a firm hold on the phone since Laura still hasn't grasped what it is she's to do with it.

"Hello."

"Mom I'm not coming in today. I've got the kids and they're just not up to it and neither am I. Derrick left this morning."

"Left? How can he leave he hasn't even got here yet."

"No, he's not coming to see you. He left our house."

"Well just tell him to come back."

"It's not that easy. Mom, I'm just trying to let you know why we aren't coming today. I'll come see you tomorrow, alright?"

*"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time, And all our yesterdays have lighted fools, The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow..."* Laura mumbles into the phone.

Ashley rubs her forehead and groans. There will be no understanding for Laura. There will be no understanding for Ashley or Maggie or Aaron. Mackenzie will grow up to not understand and Derrick too does not understand. Life has

twisted and turned until not a one of them can see where they started or where it will end. What they all know is that their light to get them all through it has slowly begun to fade and they are powerless to stop it.

The nurse gently takes Laura's arm and leads her out of the waiting room. The old woman twists and turns. She looks back at the empty room. The guests should be coming and she can't be a good hostess if she is not there. She does not understand that they are not coming and she would only be left waiting. However, for Laura that is what life has become; one long wait. She will forever be waiting for what she has lost to return until her light goes out.

# Nicholas Longdo

## “Frozen”

Snow crunched beneath Wesley Howell's pack boots as he pulled the toboggan across Lake Menomin. The haul across the frozen lake had taken the sixty-seven year old longer than he had anticipated, causing his back to ache. His breathing grew heavier with each step, and he could feel small beads of sweat forming on his brow. With the shanty less than a third of a mile away, he unzipped his gray down jacket and decided to take a five-minute break before completing the trek to his remote spot on the lake. There was still plenty of time left in the day for him to catch that godforsaken walleye.

“Today's the day, Cal,” the man sighed as he carefully lowered himself onto a clear space next to an empty five-gallon bucket and a smaller bucket full of minnows secured on the toboggan with hay twine. Legs protected by black climate bibs stretched outward as Wesley filled his lungs with brisk winter air, a stream of vapor emitting from his nostrils as he exhaled. “It has to be.”

Wesley took off his insulated gloves and started rubbing his chapped, aged hands together as he examined the lake. The night before there had been a light snow, a calm before the storm that was to come, that made the icy lake glisten as the sun's rays beamed down on it. To his right he could just barely see the village of unoccupied ice shanties, their owners most likely doing mindless work or playing violent games on their doohickies or doing whatever it was the younger generation did these days. It was the sight to his left, though, that brought a small smile to his face. His shanty, extremely meek in comparison to the other ones in the shanty village, was still standing.

Strong gusts of wind came out of nowhere, catching the man by surprise and cutting his break short. As quickly as his brittle body would allow him, Wesley zipped up his jacket, replaced his gloves, and got back on his feet. He patted his checkered fur hat down to make sure it wouldn't fly off his head and started walking again, the toboggan moving with each step he took toward the shanty. As another gust of icy wind blew and his teeth began to chatter, he couldn't help but remember what had happened three years before on the very same lake.

“Are we there yet? My feet hurt. I need to sit down. I'm gonna die!”

The old man couldn't help but chuckle at his grandson's complaining. This was the ninth time within the past fifteen minutes Calvin had said the same thing to him. He understood that walking against the brisk winds of Lake Menomin had to be quite tiring for a five-year-old boy who was used to sitting around watching some show about an annoying talking yellow sponge. But Wesley was getting just as much of a workout as the youngster walking beside. His aching back told him as much as he dragged the loaded toboggan behind him with heavy breathes.

“We're nearly there,” Wesley enlightened the boy, who was clad in an oversized down jacket that made him look like a blue marshmallow.

He held his free hand ahead of him, directing Calvin's attention to the shanty roughly eighty yards in front of them. "Look."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Calvin's head shoot up and watched a puffy blob of blue sprint ahead of him. Even though he wanted to tell him to not run or work up a sweat, the man did not say a word. The only thing that escaped his mouth was laughter as the boy almost slipped on ice and then continued to run as fast as his stubby legs and heavy winter gear would allow. *Just like his father. If only he could stay this young and innocent forever...*

Five minutes came and went by the time Wesley caught up with the small boy at the humble shanty. Already a path around it had been made thanks to Calvin walking around it multiple times, examining how overly simple it was in comparison to the other ice shanties located on the other side of the lake. The structure in front of them consisted of large wooden boards and, to provide some light, a white door with a small window on one side. Resourceful, inexpensive, and perhaps a little breezy, it was perfect for simple folk like him. It was, however, a different matter for the people of the shanty village and his grandson.

"Is – is there – is there elecsticity in here?" Calvin asked as he opened the door with his tiny hands and curiously peered inside what would be their source of shelter until sunset.

"Nope. Don't need it out here, Cal." Wesley couldn't stop himself from grinning when he saw a look of bewilderment on his grandson's face. He chuckled as he pulled the toboggan closer to the door and untied the twine that kept the tools from being carried away with the wind, remembering that Calvin's father had the same reaction the first time he went to the shanty many years ago.

"I fink it is smart having elecsticity in ice houses."

The first items off the toboggan were two empty five-gallon buckets, followed by a jiggling rod and a medium-sized box containing leaders, hooks, and other ice fishing tools. "They aren't going about it right. You don't need it out here, Cal. They're missing out on a true experience. This is the way I did it with your father and my father with me," the older man replied gruffly, rummaging through the tools that clanged loudly against each other. "He should be here doing this with you, but he's apparently too busy with his job to come out to the lake. Luckily for you, I'm here to give you the experience of a lifetime."

Calvin, who exposed his brunette head by taking off his hat briefly to scratch a large ear, merely blinked in response. Not a single word left his soft lips until he shivered and immediately put the hat back on his head. "Electricity would make it more hot in here."

"Hmm. I think I've got something that might warm you up a bit. Here," Wesley said as he grabbed something from the tool box that looked like a ladle and handed it to Calvin. "This here is a skimmer. Take it and scoop out the slush in that hole over there. Can't catch a walleye if we can't get to it, you know." After the boy took the skimmer with a scrunched up face and squatted by the hole, Wesley quickly turned toward the door and brought in the bucket of minnows and a small cardboard box that remained outside on the toboggan.

He set the minnows next to the already half-cleared hole and, with the box still at hand, sat down on the bottom end of one of the five-gallon buckets.

“What’s that?”

Not a word was said the man set the box on the ground and slowly opened it. Calvin tried stretch out his neck as far as it would go just to peek at what was inside, but his chance of getting a quick glimpse was taken from him as Wesley turned away from Calvin. The sleeves of the man’s jacket brushed against the cardboard as he excitedly revealed a small battery-operated radio that had seen better days. Shortly after a moment of silence and the turning of a few knobs, familiar country tunes from the man’s youth filled the shanty.

“Best music in the whole world,” Wesley commented with a cheeky grin as Calvin rolled his eyes and scooped out more slush with a groan.

The steady, not-too-loud music eased him to sleep while he leaned against one of the shanty walls with the jigging rod held loosely in his left hand. The bobber swayed back and forth steadily in the water as loud snores escaped his throat. Nothing had taken the bait yet, and Wesley couldn’t help but nod off as he sat on the only five-gallon bucket he brought with him. He found in his old age that he could literally doze off anywhere at any time, especially when he was bundled up in the shanty alone like he was now.

In his slumber, Wesley dreamed about what could have been. The horrific event of three years ago played through his mind, though this time it was him who had been in Calvin’s place. Time quickly jumped forward in his mind, the focus always on the imagined future of his grandson. The first scene showed Calvin standing tall and proud as he was declared champion of the third grade spelling bee. Following came the day he was announced prom king, the day he received a diploma from college, and the day he said his wedding vows. Then, at the end of it all, the day he took his own son ice fishing and the rod began to shake in his hands as the bobber fell below the water’s surface.

This moment in his dream seemed the most real to him. It was as if he were the aged version of Calvin, the jigging rod shaking in his hand as he thrusting upward with all his might and told the youngster sitting next to him to grab the coveted wall-eye that would be coming through the hole in the ice in mere seconds.

By the time Wesley was shaken from his sleep and realized what was happening, the rod effortlessly escaped his grasp and began its descent into the hole. He had a feeling in his gut that the fish hooked on the other end of the line was a wall-eye.

“Cal!”

His attempt to save the rod by lunging after it and sticking his hand into the water did not work out in his favor. Wesley remained in the same position, on his hands and knees, for about two minutes before he slowly pulled himself to his feet. Without a doubt, he was going to be sore by the time he made the walk across the lake.

"We'll get her next time, Cal," he whispered, looking through the window of the door toward the heavens. The sky was already turning pink and purple as the sun set beyond the horizon as icy water dripped from his glove. "I promise."

Hours had gone by without much excitement inside the shanty. The fish in their hazed state beneath the layer of ice just were not biting, which was why Wesley fell asleep to the music playing on his radio with the rod in his hand. During this time, Calvin seized the opportunity to take out the video game device that he had hidden away in his jacket pocket. Song after song played and the battery life on the device lowered, but not a single walleye took the bait.

A nightmare awoke Wesley with a start, causing Calvin to jump where he sat and remain very still. It took a while for the old man's eyesight to adjust, but he did recognize that it was much darker in the shanty than it had been when they arrived. The only source of illumination came from the electronic device that his grandson, who remained still with an open mouth and wide eyes as if he were frozen, was holding. Wesley remembered telling him that he couldn't bring his games to the lake, but he was going to play 'good grandpa' and let it slide just this one time.

"Hand me that contraption, Cal." He pulled the lining the rod was attached to out of the water and set it down on the ice. As Calvin hesitantly handed over the device, Wesley added, "Don't worry. You'll get it back. Just gotta find the flashlight so we can see where we're going."

It didn't take very long to find the flashlight or even load everything back onto the toboggan. With it being dark outside and the temperature beginning to drop, Wesley was more than motivated to get back home where he and Calvin could get warm by fireplace, drink a cup of hot cocoa, and then retire for bed.

"Ready to go?"

Calvin, who had started playing his device immediately after getting it back, gave a small nod in response. Because he hadn't scolded him about bringing it, Wesley knew that there was no hope in getting his grandson to stop whatever he was doing until they were off the lake. He thought about having Calvin sit on the toboggan, but there was no way his frail back would be able to pull it across the lake with both Calvin and the fishing gear on it. And he knew that asking him to put the blasted thing away wouldn't work. Having raised six of his own boys, he knew better than anyone else that kids would be kids. They were too into their gizmos and gadgets to enjoy the simple things in life.

"Alrightie. Just be sure to keep up with me," he advised as he tied the last bit of hay twine that would keep everything on the toboggan from blowing away if the wind started to pick up randomly as it was known to do on the lake during winter. "Okay?"

"Mhmm."

Without another word, the man patted down the flaps of his checkered fur hat and began the trek, a hand holding the flashlight and the other pulling the toboggan that was swiftly following him. As snow crunched loudly beneath his pack boots, he could hear the loud beeping and crashing sounds come from Calvin's video game thanks to his hearing aid.



Even as the wind began to pick up, he could still faintly hear the sounds behind him as they slowly approached the empty shanty village. "Come on, Cal," he urged, taking in deep breathes to steady his heart rate as he tugged on the string of the toboggan with a little more strength.

But Wesley knew something was wrong the instant he didn't hear a response or couldn't hear the sounds anymore. Dropping the string of the toboggan, he remembered the nightmare that woke him earlier and felt his heart skip a beat. He stopped walking, waving his flashlight left and right from where he stood in the middle of the lake, and shouted Calvin's name as loud as his lungs would allow him. The boy in the blue down jacket was nowhere to be seen.

Every time he went fishing on Lake Menomin during the winter, Wesley always stopped to visit the spot where Calvin had fallen through, where he was forever frozen as a five-year-old boy. He remembered how he left the toboggan in the middle of the lake, how his back and feet ached as he frantically searched for his grandson, and how his heart broke when he followed wavering footsteps to the hole in the ice. He remembered reaching into the hole, hoping for a miracle as ice-cold water soaked his gloves. But, just like he wasn't able to pull out the walleye, he wasn't able to pull Calvin out from the water.

This time was no different than the last, apart from the snow falling around him at a rapid pace and the temperature being much colder than it had been during the day. The man had become numb to the cold, numb to the pain he was used to feeling throughout each of his frail bones, after sitting on his knees for so long. Sorrow deep within in his soul was the only thing that wasn't numb, keeping him mentally frozen to the lake with each passing winter.

"I should've been there to save you, Cal," Wesley whispered faintly, tears falling from his wrinkly face onto the ice. "I – I am so – so sorry."

# Kourtney Sande

## “Letters to Agony”

I recalled my parents telling me how life was simple, like taking a morning stroll and letting the sun’s rays hit your face and smile. I always wondered what that would be like, to not worry, and to not have your guard up, never to run away, no more tears of agony...

Reality hit me like a slap in the face. I heard an explosion not too far from where we were. All I could think was, why can’t people just leave things the way they should be? Why do people have to be so damn stupid and mess with the human body to make “biological advances”? Please. Let humanity be left to their suffering, after all, this was the 21st century.

I held the rifle close to my beating chest and heard nothing but silence. I didn’t know where those bastards were hiding but I knew they were carrying their useless bodies across the damaged streets, hoping to find another innocent being to take. The streets that were once a metropolis and full of life and normality, is now a place where you can find dead corpses and blood splattered on the windows.

Kaylee looked up at me with those beautiful aqua eyes...just like her father. She gripped my shirt and whispered:

“Mommy, are we going to be okay?”

I looked down at her and smiled knowing that’s the kind of question a six year old girl would ask.

“We will be fine sweetie, everything will be alright.” I said with a shy smile.

I wanted to be optimistic for her and Jason, the only people I have left now. I brushed her blonde hair away from her cheek, and looked at Jason, my oldest

“How can things be ok, when Dad isn’t here?” He stated.

I pushed him behind me, and gave him a penetrating stare. I wish he would keep that adolescent mouth shut.

“Don’t scare your sister, we know Dad isn’t here right now, but we will find him.” I said with fake confidence.

I hope, is what I thought. I didn’t know if Ryan was dead or not, but we had to get through this shadow of a city and try to find shelters outside of town, where the creatures wouldn’t venture. Again hopefully.

I pushed the kids ahead of me, as I swung the gun on my back, and made sure Jason went first, and then Kaylee, then I followed. I kept hearing dragging footsteps and was afraid to move. I was tired of this hiding, and tired of having my kids grow up in this kind of atmosphere, Dear agony, is this the way it's got to be? I kept asking myself the same question over and over, wishing there was a god to answer me. It seemed like agony was my only emotion lately. Even though I had my two beautiful children, it still wasn't the same without having Ryan telling me everything would be ok. The only thing I wanted was the kids to be safe, and Ryan safe, but I was losing hope of finding Ryan.

I wiped the dirt and tears of my face as we walked around the alley street of to get to the edge of town. My heart racing thinking our lives could end any moment. I heard noises, human like noises but I wasn't sure, after two years of hiding, things could get to your head. Only after I looked around a few times I heard something running and moaning towards us. I grabbed the kids and pushed them behind me, and grabbed the rifle. I frantically glanced to the kids as I tried to think of something fast.

"Grab Kaylee!" I told Jason, as he scooped up Kaylee and ran towards the end of town and into the forest. I shot at the beasts coming after us, once in the head, then once again in the chest. Thank God we were close to the edge of town, because that way we could find the shelters. As I killed the first monster, others came as the blood kept hitting the skies, these bastards were endless. There were too many of them, and I knew we were going to die. I kept saying to myself. Even though I was being selfish, I wanted all this agony to end. A lifetime of constant running. Running from sanctuary to sanctuary. Kaylee and Jason deserves better than this. I just hoped either we all would die to escape this unforgiving hell, but at the same time, I wanted them to be strong and keep going.

I clutched the kids close then, shoved them up into the tallest tree I could sight. I grabbed my rifle and blasted some of the hoard back, pulled out a grenade, and scrambled to join the kids.

*Dear agony...dear Agony...Why?* The inevitable statement came back to me.

The monsters seemed to have lost the trail, so they stopped pursuing. When it was safe to come down, I held a crying Kaylee and held Jason's hands. I was happy they were safe for the time being. Once night came, we would track down the camps.

At nightfall, I heard crunching through the bushes. Thinking it was time to probably sleep in a tree, I saw a man come out, not a blood leaking man, but a normal one. His aqua eyes and dishwater hair was not to be mistaken, he looked up at me, and tears started flowing, "Ryan? I spoke in quiet delight. Hopefully, we could have some inner peace, and our minds would settle, even if it was just for a moment.

# Jacob Smuda

## “Running Away”

I hate happy endings. There is something . . . I don't know. . . depressing about them. Whenever I see one of those movie endings where the heroes are riding off into the sunset or something, I get the sense that they are traveling into some desolate oblivion from which they will never return. Sure, unhappy endings make people cry and instills a deep sense of bleakness on one's mind, but for me they make me elated in a strange way. It just suits who I am. I am one who fights a long, pointless battle. Most people would tell me to win this battle, but I want to lose it. Then I can have true happiness, because I will have the pills.

I don't know. I guess I'm just odd that way. I'm one of the odd people in the world, if you want to call it that. You know, one of those male, twenty-year-old, long-haired, overweight, unhandsome, jobless, directionless high school drop-outs. That kind of odd. I've been “odd” from the beginning, but over time my problems have gone beyond oddity. I've tried to fight it; the Throughout this time, I have been drawing the conclusion that I am incompatible with this world. There are so many things I don't understand. I don't understand politics. I don't understand history. I don't understand world hunger, and I don't understand world prosperity. I don't understand religion. I don't understand cruelty. I don't understand kindness. I don't understand why some people fight, and why others don't. I don't understand why my parents fight. I don't understand why God gave me this lot in life. I don't understand why I should be alive. And that's why I take the pills.

And I don't understand why I am babysitting my cousin. That has to be one of the oddest, most mind-boggling concepts I have tried to wrap my brain around today. I know my aunt is eccentric (I think that sort of thing must run in my family), but why? Why in God's green earth would she choose me of all people to babysit Angela? Maybe she was desperate. She usually does have a busy schedule, what with all of her charity work and church activities. Sometimes she seems even crazier than me, the way she wears herself out helping people. She does seem to have a high regard for me. She's all smiles whenever I meet her, always telling embarrassing stories to others about me that she thinks are enthralling. It's like she sees something inside of me that I don't see. Anyway, she smiled that smile of hers after she informed me of my babysitting assignment. She said it might be good for me.

And Angela, my little cousin, is the wrong person to leave with me. She is odd, but not odd like me. She is more of a gentle, childish sort of odd. She is the kind who seems to be intelligent for her age (she is only six), but still immature. She has an unfathomable and annoying sense of curiosity, and seems to have a knack for getting into trouble. I am sitting on the couch, staring at her right now. She is doing something with her dollhouse. It looks like she is rearranging something.

The living room, like the rest of my aunt's house, is the opposite of that dollhouse: bare. Bare except for a few obscure odds and ends, along with the dollhouse. The emptiness must be due to its occupants' humble, airy-fairy sense of life, I guess. Man, if it wasn't for them, and especially for that damn kid, I could have had some fun and taken some of those pills! I really wish Angela would go somewhere and take a nap or something. She is a lot like her mother. She's kind to people and seems to ride through life on a cloud. Meanwhile, people like me walk on the ground and do stupid things to cheer us up, like get into fights and do drugs. There is something profound about the look in her eyes, though. Watching her brings back memories of when I was her age, when I had the faith of a child. When I had the stupidity of a child. A child who didn't know about the real world.

I'm starting to get antsy. I start twitching my hand. Sometimes, I glare longingly at my backpack. No one knows about them, and I want to keep it that way. I can't take them while she's in the room.

"What's wrong?"

I almost start from my seat. "What?"

"What's wrong?" Angela asks. She is staring at me with her big, piercing eyes with the smallest hint of distress.

"Oh. Nothing," I reply shakily. "I'm just tired." It is as if she can somehow sense my anguish. She has a strange way of getting into people's minds. I don't like it.

She looks down for a moment and seems to contemplate something briefly, then says, "Do you ever like to get lost?"

"What did you say?"

"Do you ever like to get lost? I like to get lost. Sometimes I feel really sad, like you," she says, briefly pointing to me. "Sometimes people are mean to me, too. I don't like it. But when I'm sad, I just run away. I like to go far away", she says with broad a wave of her arm. "Way past our block. Sometimes even all the way to the bridge." She kept emphasizing the great distance with her arm.

Although it seemed like something strange that a child would say, her voice didn't seem so childish. She said this slowly. There was something profound about the tone of her voice. It was almost as if she were imparting some secret to me.

"Isn't it naughty for little girls to run away?" I asked in a snarky tone.

"Oh no, it isn't running away," she said emphatically, shaking her head. "It's more like going someplace. Anyway, I always come back again."

"Aren't you ever worried about getting punished?" I asked, with adult skepticism.

“Not really. My mom always says that that sort of thing’s good. She says it’s better for people than watching TV all day or doing drugs or something like that.”

I twitch a bit. I felt a twinge of discomfort from that last statement, but I managed to conceal it. I had tried to quit the pills before, but after days of just staring at them sitting in the bottle, I always break down and take a bunch of them at once.

“So what’s so great about getting lost?”

“I don’t know. Once I heard someone say that when a person gets lost, he can find himself again.”

“That sounds weird.”

“Wanna come with me?”

I’m dumbfounded. I open my mouth to say something, but can’t think of what to say. I don’t know why, but I just don’t know how to react to what this little kid with those beaming eyes staring right through me just said to me.

“Please?”

I am feeling another longing wave of nostalgia again for those years that I have almost forgotten about. This is stupid, I think to myself. What’s wrong with me? Then I think, well, a lot.

It won’t hurt. Besides, I don’t want to have to deal with an upset child.

“Um. . .okay, but. . .” I look at my backpack. “Just let me get something.”

I get up, take my backpack into the bathroom, and close the door. Trying not to make any noise, I take out the bottle, select some pills, and put them in my breast pocket.

I feel uneasy about this. We have gone past our block. But seeing Angela walk and talk with her usual confident air kind of makes me feel better. I still have to admit I feel uneasy about following the whims of a child. It’s totally ridiculous, but it looks like she knows what she is doing. Seeing her enjoy herself makes me walk at a livelier pace. And besides, it’s a beautiful autumn day. The red sun is setting in the west, and the shadows of the bare but sturdy trees are lengthening. A pleasant, gentle breeze is blowing the leaves from the sidewalk onto the deserted street in gusts.

“I like this time of year,” I say, trying to start a conversation.

“I hate autumn,” Angela replies sullenly. I am a bit surprised by this sudden expression of negativity.

“Really? Why?”

“Because everything’s dying.”

“What about winter?”

“Then everything’s dead.”

I chuckle warmly.

“Well, in spring everything always comes back again,” I say. Everything always comes back again. I pause for a moment. Those words stick with me.

“Come on. I’ll show you the bridge,” she said.

“Are you sure you know the way?”

She smiled. “No, but I’ll find it.”

We are leaning on the railing, staring down at the slowly flowing river. The water we are watching will join the mighty Mississippi, which will eventually find its way to the ocean. To pass the time, I try to teach Angela about how water from the ocean evaporates and returns to the land as precipitation. We are teaching each other many things that day.

I find myself impulsively reaching into my breast pocket and taking out the pills. I stare at them as they sit on the palm of my hand, the river flowing below. Take one, I think. Just one. It will make you happy. But only for a while. Then things will go backward again. I’m just so sick and tired of this life. What use is it anymore? I just stare blankly for a while. Then, I let the pills slip through my fingers and fall into the water below. As we walk off of the bridge, I give a slight chuckle.

“What is it?”

“We’re walking off into the sunset,” I say.

“So?” she says, looking at me.

“I used to think that sort of thing was sad, but this doesn’t seem sad.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know where I’m going.”

## “The Mud Plain”

“Welcome to the mud plain.” That is what the sign would say. . . only, there is no sign. No. A sign would have sunk into the mud. If you took a stick of dynamite and set it off in the middle of this place (assuming you could set it off at all), it would send up a blast of mud like the splash created from a man doing a cannonball into a pool. But the hole it made would slowly but surely close up again. This place cannot be broken . . .

Not too many people go here for pleasure, and even fewer live here, because it is a desert. I say it is a desert, because even though it is a wet place, trying to obtain water from here would be a fruitless endeavor. That is, unless you wanted to slowly and painfully poison yourself. The mud and clay would clog up your stomach and make your muscles freeze. I suppose one could turn him or herself into a statue by gulping down enough of this thick putrescence. But it wouldn’t be a glorious statue. It would be an ugly, pathetic, crumbling statue. It rains here often, which of course only makes things worse: it simply adds to the slime and mire. Makes things thicker. Not even snakes or worms could survive here. As is the case sometimes, this place doesn’t need such accessories to be an unpleasant dwelling.

You would think that this would be the perfect place to send exiles and convicts: a perfect punishing ground, a true hell. Ironically, many of those who go here are *sent* here . . . forced here on business by their harsh, steel-hearted bosses. The employers want profit. The employees want to put food on their tables. Everyone needs money. Go along to get along. As you can imagine, not many come back. And what kind of business is it? Perhaps they think if they send enough of them, the mud, mixed with the prodigious bodies of these mud pioneers, will harden and become fertile. Greed at the expense of others. . . going for the wrong reasons.

And yet there are a few . . . well, perhaps more than a few. . . who go here neither for business nor pleasure. They aren’t forced to go by others. They just go. What surprises, and perhaps, what *amuses* me most is that these people are all different: that is, both left and right, white and black, smart and ignorant. These people seem to have something in common. Is it a common spirit that guides them? Do they adhere to a common creed or manifesto? They seem like obscure people, but at the same time, many are aware of what they are doing. Did I say smart and ignorant earlier? Well, surely they must all be ignorant to come here.

They are driven by. . . no, they seek something. . . perhaps both. They seem awfully eager to harden their flesh and turn into statues. Do they want to harden themselves? . . . I don’t know. Why should I even talk about them? They aren’t talked about often. When they are, they are regarded with either pity or scorn. I wonder about them. Yet, sometimes when I think about them, I remember reading in some forgotten book that people get lost in deserts to find themselves. . .

This place is no fairytale. This place is real. This place is life. This place is the world. . . and it is yours to conquer . . .



# Katie Wolden

## “Awakening”

She rose, stretching out slender limbs like pale shoots reaching for the sun. Dry leaves shook free from the folds of her dress. Running her fingers through her thick, dark hair, she dislodged a small creature—a sleeping mouse—which she cupped in her hands. The warm body quivered slightly as if in anticipation; whiskers twitching, ready to smell, legs moving, ready to run. Lifting it to her lips, she breathed deeply, taking in the scent of exquisite, pulsating life. Then, she blew gently, rippling the soft, brown fur. Bright, black eyes sprang open, observing her for a split second with unquestioning calm. Then, bending like a sapling in the wind, she placed it on the ground. A rustle of leaves and the creature was gone, the caress of its awakener forgotten.

Pale lips curved upward, she began to walk, dark eyes akin to those of the mouse, flickering about her surroundings. The sleeping forest stretched around her, silent, yet humming with the same energy that had moved the limbs of the tiny animal. A chill rose from the hard-packed earth but as her bare feet touched it, she felt the thaw begin. Patches of dirty snow began to shrink, trickling together into a narrow, winding stream which she followed, leisurely. The trees stood cold and dormant; ancient, earthly guardians. Their branches etched jagged black patterns across the pallid sky. But, placing her palms upon their rough surface as she passed by, she felt the warm center of ageless life within. High in the branches, birds began to sing, followed by the frenzied skittering of squirrels. From deep within their trunks, the trees gave a reverberating sigh.

Yes, she whispered, wordlessly, it is time.

The blue of the distant sky seemed to deepen above her, the sunlight warming on her leaf-scattered tangles. Her feet quickened as the ground sloped gently downward, melting snow flowing faster between her toes. Then, the river was before her, a sluggish, half-frozen mass. She approached it, purposefully, placing one delicate foot on the ice and then the other. It groaned deep within, stirring, coiling like a waking dragon. She began to sink slowly as the ice beneath her melted away, absorbing her into the body of the beast. It opened up to her, cool and soothing, water embracing her form. Free, beneath the surface, she began to swim. The dense particles parted before her, washing over her skin, and tugging leaves and knots from her hair. Gently, they enveloped her, carrying her faster and faster as the current became electrified with life.

Twisting, summersaulting, kicking the last remnants of sleep from her limbs, she at last rose to surface where she was deposited neatly on the bank like a piece of sediment.

There, she basked, sunlight soaking the moisture from the woven fibers of her dress. Working her fingers through her hair, she released the extra fuzz into the air. It caught on a nearby shrub and was gladly taken by swallow, in the process of building its nest. The river crashed powerfully by, carrying away the last debris of winter. She stood, surveying it in satisfaction. Then, turned and made her way into the trees.

The trees here were even older than those upstream; thick, knarled, and stubborn. One by one, she approached them, wrapping her bare arms around their ancient bodies, hands barely meeting on the other side. They greeted her, welcoming if somewhat reluctant. The eldest trees, she lingered with for a while, coaxing them from sleep. Memories ran through their bark beneath her fingers, muddled and confused.

No, she told them in their silent language, it is not that time. It is a new time now.

Ah, they accepted, resignedly, letting go of the past.

A flush had begun to rise beneath her skin and her lips bloomed petal pink; the life of the forest pulsed through her. She paused in a clearing, tilting her face upward and closing her eyes. Slowly, she lifted her arms to the sky, spreading her fingers like branches. Her left leg rose from the ground, disappearing under her dress as she rested the bottom of her foot against her right calf. Perfectly still, she balanced, feeling the roots of each tree beneath the earth, invisibly connected to her.

Wake up, she whispered through the sole of her right foot and the message spread outward in rhythmic waves, vibrating through the network of roots. The very air seemed to thrum. Eyes closed, she drifted, seeing fragments of every part of the forest for miles around.

*Thwack!*

She tipped, suddenly, plunging toward the ground until her left leg shot out to steady her. Ears ringing with the sound, she stood still, dark eyes round and disoriented.

Thwack, it came again, accompanied by strange tugging sensation within her chest. Turning in the direction of the sound, she began to walk, and then to run.

Thwack. A splash of red came into sight, striking amidst the brown and grey. A red flannel shirt, rolled up tightly over thick arms.

Thwack. The axe in his broad, calloused hands bit deeply into the body of the tree again, expanding the white, gaping wound. She jerked to a stop behind him, standing with arms outstretched. He paused, scratching under his beaver-skin hat. Then, his shoulders tensed, drawing back the axe again.

Thwack. She let out a gasp, sharp and sudden, clutching at her chest. Again, he paused, turning as though he may have heard something.

Dull brown eyes traveled over her, sightlessly. Within them, she saw the simplest, most primal innocence. But they did not burn with the elemental awareness of a waking mouse. They were sleeping eyes; sweetly oblivious as the ancient tree, the frozen river.

Keeping one hand to her chest, she reached the other out toward him, fingers trembling slightly.

*Wake up*

But the eyes continued to stare blankly beyond her. Wiping his nose with his sleeve, he turned away again.

*Thwack.*

The tree wept sap like golden tears.

# Samantha Wolfe

## “Phantom Limb”

It started as a prickle. A mere sensation of active nerve endings. It startled him, but he knew what it was. The doctors had told him. He would feel phantom pains in his amputated hand from time to time. He got used to it, got used to doing chores, putting on clothes, eating, all with a hand he never thought would lose its twin.

The first time he noticed something might be wrong was when he woke up in the middle of the night. For a moment, he could feel his hand, stretch the atrophied muscles, wiggle the fingers.

And he felt someone grasping his hand.

He tried to shake it off. He thought about other things as he shelved books at the library. He was oblivious to any thought whatsoever when he cleaned rooms at the hotel. He blocked it out when he bussed tables at the midnight diner. And when he stretched out in bed, he had convinced himself that it was just a trick of the night.

He woke again, the grip on his hand stronger.

He went through his day, exactly the same as the days before. The only indication that he might have something on his mind was the constant tapping of his foot. No one noticed. No one cared. That night, he expected the grip on his phantom hand.

Tonight, he squeezed back.

He quietly copied a set of Morse code charts at the library. It cost him 50 cents. He told the librarian to take it out of his paycheck. He studied the charts while pushing the grimy janitor's cart, practiced tapping while clearing tables. And that night, excited but tentative, he tapped out a short greeting with nonexistent fingers.

**HELLO.**

The result was immediate. A flurry of sensation on his hand, as though butterfly wings were flapping against it. Finally, it calmed down, and a quick reply was tapped out on his palm. It takes him a while to decipher the answer.

*YOU UNDERSTAND ME.*

He begins to tap, and feels a second hand guide his own into another palm. He taps out a question on chilled flesh.

**WHO ARE YOU.**

Abruptly, all sensation stops. He cannot feel anything, not even his own phantom limb. He feels more alone and sad than he figures he should be.

A few days pass, and the entity returns. He drops a stack of dishes, luckily only a few inches, when he feels the taps. Ignoring the looks of pity, he pulls out the chart from his pocket.

YOU MISS IT.

He looks around, trying to meet the faces of the diners and busboys and cooks. No one will meet his eyes. They all stare pointedly away from the hole in space where his hand should be. By ignoring his handicap, they are ignoring him too. He sighs, and taps out a brief response.

YES.

He carefully records every conversation, filling first one notebook, then two. He withdraws further than ever, only going out for work and to procure groceries. He forgets to sleep, staying up long into the night with the only being that understands him.

The library calls, and he resigns over the phone.

He quits his job as a housekeeper a week later.

He doesn't show up to the diner for a fortnight.

A coworker stops by his house to drop off his paycheck and letter of termination. This man is the one who discovers the scene. He was found hanging from the ceiling fan, eyes bulging, tongue swollen and lolling out, face black and purple. A note was clenched in his hand.

JOIN ME.

He was buried without ceremony. No one came. The only thing that baffled the police and the coroner was the manner of death.

It is impossible to tie a noose with one hand.

# Ian Walker

## “Lucidity”

### I

Aedan O'Halloran is the name. I was born in a small village by the name of Killarney, a small village in the county of Kerry. Ireland has always been my homeland, my passion, and a place that I can comfortably and confidently call “home” with pride. I was born under Michael and Branna O'Halloran in the spring of 1892 in this village, where I continued to live the rest of my life into my early adult years. My parents are very tender and loving people, with very strong family values that have been embroidered into my personality; along with how they taught me that hard work leads to success. My family is very important to me; which is why this story will forever be a memory that I cannot forget; a memory and a sequence of events that has led me to conjugate a different perspective and outlook on life and death.

The spring of 1912 is when my life took an unfortunate turn. I had just turned twenty years of age, and was preparing myself for manhood and the responsibilities to follow. My father had always driven the point home of how to be a man and what a man must do; which was what I was mentally and socially preparing myself for. However, nothing could have prepared me for such an emotionally tugging and arduous time. My mother had fallen ill to an ailment named pneumonia, which had only escalated into her being bed-ridden and unable to connect with the outside world. The feeling was terrible. She was hopeless, as were we. My father and I were doing everything that we could to try and help make her life better despite her condition, but nothing we did seemed to ease her pain. We would change her bedpan frequently to be rid of any risk of infection, we would read some of her favorite Shakespearean poems and sonnets to her, and my father would play her favorite songs on his violin like he would in the day when they were just sweethearts. But nothing seemed to work; she would just lay in her bed with a look on her face that was most pitiful and hopeless that I would feel my eyes swell with tears. But I would look away to veil my weak emotions, for I knew that I needed to be strong for her. However even though I knew this, I could tell that she was losing hope. She knew that she was not long for this world and it killed my father. It made me sad as well, but I knew that there wasn't much that we could do. Life was taking its toll.

I began to wander around the more populated parts of Kerry to ease my mind full of pain and anguish, going to the occasional pub to meet some new lads or lasses, which seemed to help for the time-being. However I learned that no matter the amount of beer or whiskey I drank, I could not forget about my dying mother and the ever-present look of hopelessness on her sweet and innocent face. One night, when I was wandering home stumbling in the cobblestone street, drunk and my mind inflamed with emotion and thought, I met a man.

He stood under the Gaslamp, cloaked in a dark grey tweed-knit trench coat, veiling his face with a dark wool driver's cap. A cigarette sat lamely between his lips, with the smoke dancing off of the end it then only to wisp away in the night wind. He was a well-dressed chap; seeming to be a man of some importance in politics or education. I approached him closer and closer, finding some sort of attraction to his presence. I could not take my eyes off of him for some reason. He then unveiled his eyes from under his driver's cap as he lifted his head and took a casual drag off of his fag. His eyes met mine, and he bowed his head in a respectful but nonchalant manner and iterated, "Good evening, sir." I replied, "Good evenin'. How are ya on this chilly night?" He raised his head and looked around in the night sky for a moment, almost as if he were studying or examining something. "I am well, considering the consequences. How are you, sir?" he replied, with a stern look on his face. "I could be better, I suppose. My mother is not well. She has been bed-ridden for the past two months, and my father and I know not what to do." He looked at me as if he were studying me with great intent for a moment or two, and then looked back down at the street whilst taking another drag of his cigarette. I could tell that he was a quiet man; a man that says much without saying a lot.

"Walk with me," said he, to which I did. We walked down the cobblestone street together, with him occasionally helping me walk straight. He asked what had happened to my mother and why she was so ill, so I told him everything that had happened. She had gotten what we thought was to be a common cold, which moved to pneumonia, which spread to her lungs making her frail and weak. All the while I was telling him this; he had not a look of concern or disdain, nor the slightest facial expression of any sort. I was slightly confused and unsettled by his lack of emotion; however I felt that I needed to be around a character such as him to learn to be and feel stronger. He made a slight remark of sympathy, even though it sounded slightly insincere. "What is your name, lad?" he asked me. "Aedan O'Halloran of Killarney," I replied proudly, hoping he would know of my place of origin. "Ah yes," said he, "I knew many a-fellow from that village. Very quaint little area, that is. Very mystic. Very secluded." I found myself genuinely surprised that this man of his stature had heard of such a small and agricultural part of Kerry, so I retorted the question he had asked me. "Ah, yes it is. Well what do you go by, friend? Where are you from?" His answer was ominously ambiguous. It was almost as if he didn't want me to know who he was, or he was worried that I would already know him. "My name is of no importance, my friend, nor is my area of residence. My only importance is my purpose on this Earth." His answer sparked inquiry, so I asked him what this purpose was. He looked at me, then looked into the sky once again. "Look, Aed. Look at the stars. Do you see how many of them there are?" I was slightly befuddled by his answer, but I went along. I looked in the sky, and replied, "Yes, I do. There are many of them. Almost too many to acknowledge their full existence." He then looked back down to me. "That's right, Aed. Too many to acknowledge their existence. But each and every star in that sky has a purpose; whether we can see it or not.

There is a purpose for their existence, you see? Even if we do not know what that purpose is. Kind of like all of us. I have been put on this Earth for a purpose; whether you, I, the pubmaster, or God himself does or does not know what that may be. But I am here, you see? I am here for a reason that some may find frightening, while some may find it pleasant. That is who I am, Aed.” Once more I looked into the sky after he was finished speaking to look at the stars. “I suppose you’re right, friend. I can see where you’re coming fro-” I interrupted myself as I looked away from the stars to look at the man, but had seen he was gone. I looked left, I looked right; I even looked up and down. The mysterious man had disappeared without a trace; without a single word being spoken; without the slightest noise being emitted from his heel on the cobblestone. I was left mind boggled, and made my way back home.

## II

I had awakened in my room the next day, not exactly knowing how I had gotten there. I knew that I had walked home the previous night, but I did not remember the walk. Immediately I just put reason to logic and thought that I’d blacked out on the walk home from the pints I had at the pub. I went to the kitchen to find my father making steaks and potatoes for breakfast that were given to us by the Connelly’s, who were our closest neighbors. “Good morning, Aed. How are you this morning?” he asked me. “I’m fine, all things considering. How are you, father?” I slurred out. My father boomed out a thunderous belly laugh knowing how under-the-weather I was feeling and what had caused it. “I’m fine, Aed. Come. Let us go see your mother and if we can aid her in any way.” We went into my mother’s chamber only to find her in the same exact position as we had left her the day before; which was heartbreaking. Same face, same posture, same lifeless look in her eyes. “Hello, mother. How are you doing today? Would you like us to open the shades and let in some light?” She replied nothing, only staring at the ceiling. My father tried to jump in to maybe get an answer from her, asking if she wanted some breakfast, but again no reply. Only a blank stare into the universe. “I made a new friend last night, mother. He seemed like a nice and genuine lad.” That was when she broke out of her stare and slowly listed her eyes from the ceiling directly into mine. Her eyes were stricken with emotion; yet I could not tell which kind.

“He knows all, Aedan. He is life, he is death; he is everything that can be known since the dawn of man. He is the Shepard of our Dark, he is the Harbinger of our Light; he will determine all that is good and all that is evil; he will neither save us nor destroy us; he will look upon the cosmos to determine what must be done.”

I could not speak a single word. My mother had spoken these words with her eyes locked onto mine, making not the slightest twitch nor temptation to blink. Her eyes seemed to be stricken with intense fear, leaving me questioning what that whole ordeal was about. Directly after she gave me this... what seemed to be a caveat, she immediately lost consciousness and slipped back into her previous state. I was left petrified; not having the slightest notion of what to make of what my dear mother had just told me.



My father stood at the foot of the bed just as befuddled as I; staring at her, then back to me. "What the devil is she talking about, Aed?" he asked me with great concern. "I... I have no idea..." I replied, which at the same time was a very mild lie. I remembered the whole part of the conversation of when the mysterious man and I looked into the stars and contemplated their existence, to which he vanished shortly thereafter. I couldn't help but make a small connection, but at the same time, I felt that my mother was slipping into a stage of senility from her illness so I thought nothing more of it.

"Aed, I'm going to need you to run to the Connelly's to drop off some eggs that I collected from our coupe today. Would you do that please, and be a good lad?" he asked me, as if I were a small child again. "Father, don't call me lad. I'm not a child anymore." "Fine, then mister-grown-man! Git your arse down there and exchange the damned eggs!" My father was never known to genuinely get angry, just very adamant and stern about getting things done promptly and correctly. Most of the time, he would just yell in a playful or sarcastic manner towards me or other family members. I started down the country road to the Connelly's with my basket of eggs, about a dozen or so; a fair amount considering that some damned fox had kept sneaking in and killing our hens in the night.

It was a beautiful morning. The wind glazed over the rolling green pastures and hills as the sunlight danced along the blades of grass, while hearing the hiss of the breeze wisp through the branches of the Rowan trees that seemed to sway and dance to the wind's command. Beautiful blossoms on the Elder trees were busy with bee traffic, as they too had places to be and things to do. Archaic and decaying stone walls were scattered along the road, winding in and around the trees and wildflower patches, seeming to be out of place, yet complimenting the scenery and euphoric aroma that the Cherry trees had cast into the wind. This was why I loved growing up in Kerry; this was the scenery I got to endure when just walking to town. It was about a two mile walk to the Connelly's from our house, and I'd say that I was about half way there when I spotted him once again. There he stood in the pasture, under the shade of an old Alder tree by an old hidden pond. The water rippled and intense gleams of light shimmered from the Sun's reflection, almost seemingly blinding for a moment. I moved closer to the tree, and I knew it was the man. He was donning the same outfit as the night I had seen him before; the dark grey tweed coat with the dark wool driver's cap, and again; a cigarette perched itself proudly between the man's lips. He was standing there, just looking over the pond into nothing, or so it seemed. I approached the man further and further, again feeling this uncontrollable attraction to his presence and existence.

I was about five feet away from the mysterious man and had opened my mouth to greet him, but he had beaten me to it.

### III

“On your way to the Connelly’s, Aed?” he asked, almost sneering deep into my eyes. I stopped dead in my tracks, frozen in place; having an alarming sense of fear and concern overtake my conscience. I felt blood rushing to my face and my ears. My eyes were glued to his, and I had not the slightest idea of how to answer his question, so I began asking trivial questions as to how in the world he knew of my intentions and the place of which I was headed to. “What did you say, sir?” “I believe you heard me quite clearly, young man. Are you on your way to the Connelly’s, or not?” I was confused; this man has never met the Connelly’s to my knowledge, for they had never brought this man up in recent conversation. Nor did I ever remember mentioning the Connelly’s; and did not know if I should answer him honestly. I then became irritated out of fear, and demanded how he knew of this. “How in God’s name do you know of my journey there? Have you been spying on me? I am beginning to think that you are a very shady man, sir. Now, I demand you tell me at once how you knew of this, or even why you are here in the first place!” Once again, his answers were unclear and ambiguous, almost like speaking in riddles or metaphors; as if he was attempting to irritate or intimidate me even more. “What is it to ‘know’, Aed? What can man say that he truly knows, or what he does not? To ‘know’ is to be full of knowledge and certainty, Aed; not to be at a certain place at a certain time for no apparent reason or cause. What I know is what I know, Aed; and what you are attempting to know is what you should never know.”

I forgot to mention; ever since I had met with the man under the tree, his eyes never left mine. They never moved. They never twitched. Nor did they ever blink, even when little wisps of his cigarette smoke kissed his naked eyes. I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable in his presence, though I felt as though I still could not leave.

After this little philosophical statement he made that was only causing more irritation and aggravation on my part, I was starting to become hostile towards the man because I had not the slightest idea of how he could have possibly known of my whereabouts or the Connelly’s, so I began to draw my own conclusions. “Aye, so you are a fool then! Either that, or a spy, or Lucifer himself! I am beginning to think you are a danger, man, and am regretting ever meeting you on that one night! If you will not intelligently answer my question, then I will tell you this; stay away from my family, stay away from the Connelly’s, stay away from my friends and stay away from me! If you fail to heed my warning, I will promise you this here and now, you will regret it! I don’t care if you even are the devil himself, I will bring harm to you if you bring it to me!” He said nothing. He did not move. He did not break eye contact. And yet, he still did not blink. I could tell that he was no longer just staring into my eyes; rather he was glaring into the depths of my soul. After a moment of intense tension, he slowly raised his arm and removed the cigarette from his mouth, then tossed it to the ground.

“You have not the slightest idea of what I am, Aed.” I became more confused and began to feel that he was a man of self-entitlement. I scoffed. “‘What’ you are?!” He continued. “I can assure you that I am not the devil, Aed; but I am not your friend. I am something that everyone must face in their lifetime. I am neither good, nor am I evil. I will neither save you nor destroy you; I will look upon the cosmos to determine what must be done.” His eyes finally broke away from mine, and situated themselves back onto the shimmering pond as he slid his hands into his coat pockets. Once this happened, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief; almost as if I could feel positive emotions again, and that I was now at my own free will. This transition of emotion left me questioning, “Who is this ‘man’? If he could make me stay in his presence just by the formidable nature of his eyes, then he must not be human; possibly an entity in human form. I must avoid this ‘man’ from now on, for I feel that he is definitely beyond human; and could very well cause further assailments to happen in my or other’s lives. And another thing, that thing he said, where have I heard that? I know that I’ve heard it before.. those exact words.. neither saving nor destroying.. looking upon the cosmos.. This ‘man’, or ‘thing’, is definitely beyond human. I must stay away.” Upon this decision, I was still standing there wondering if I should have apologized for my earlier statement to the man, but I decided it would probably have been safer to just leave the man without further discussion, so I did. I did not even go to the Connelly’s to deliver the eggs, instead I just went straight home disregarding the fact that my father would be upset for not completing my chore like he had asked. Upon my walk back home, I remembered where I had heard those words; from my dear mother. I could not stop thinking about it the entire walk home, and became fearful that something was going to happen to my dear sick mother, and began to think that those words that had been spoken were foreshadowing an unfortunate but near coming event. With my mind once again inflamed with fearful thoughts, I hastily made my way back home and aggressively tossed the basket of eggs to the side.

#### IV

Upon arrival to my home, I ran into the house and ran directly into my father. Noticing that I was highly distressed, he grabbed ahold of me and asked, “What’s wrong, my son? Why are you so pale and full of worry?” I paced my eyes around the room then met his once again. “Where’s mother?” I asked. “Why, she’s in the bed Aedan, you know that! Why would you ask that?” I broke free from my father’s courteous grasp and sprinted to my mother’s chamber, swinging the door open and meeting her by her bedside. There she laid; same position, same facial expression, and the same stone-like appearance that seemed as if an earthquake could not disrupt. I knelt on the hardwood floor and came in closer to her, looking into her eyes and stroking my fingers through her fair golden hair. My eyes became engorged and tears ran down the side of my face and dabbed onto the sheets; for I could not shake this feeling that something tragic was going to happen soon. My father came into the room calmly, and stood like a monolith behind me. I felt his large hand meet my right shoulder and he caressed it with his thumb.

“What is the matter with you, Aed?” he asked softly with genuine concern. “What has happened to you? You’ve been acting so strange lately...” I completely forgot about the eggs, and it seemed that my father did as well, so I did not bring it up. “Father... I don’t know how to explain what’s been happening to me...” I wiped my face and stood as tall as I could to speak fairly to my father. “There’s this man that I’ve kept seeing throughout the past couple of days... and he worries me. He keeps making these remarks about things in my life that I’ve never mentioned to him, he seems to know where I am at any time or what I’m doing, and he seems to know everything about me! He’s the Devil, Father! He says not, but I swear to you he is! And with this happening amidst Mother’s condition, I know not what to do! I’m at a loss of hope just as much as she!” My eyes swelled again, and could feel my face wrinkle out of anger, fear, and sadness. I was beginning to feel like my Mother; hopeless and lost. My Father embraced me and held me tight. He was taller than I, and I could feel his wool sweater poke and irritate the skin of my face, but I did not care. “Tragedies lead to things like this, Aed,” he said genially. “Tragedies like this... they change the way a man thinks and acts. Sure, losing a family member is hard; especially a mother. Trust me, son; I know. But it’s times like this that you need to be strong for her Aed, as well as me. I’ve been trying my best to be strong for you and your dear mother, but it gets hard for me. You’ve been doing a great job until now, my boy. A very fine job. But about this man, I want you to forget about him. If he has not harmed you or anyone around you, I do not want you to think anything of him, you understand? By the sounds of it, he’s just some fool that has nothing better to do than to scare people. As far as him knowing things about you, there’s a logical explanation for everything, son. I can assure you that he is not the Devil. I need you to move on, son; and keep being the great man that you are becoming. It’s all right to unleash emotion once in a while, but a man stands strong for his family, you see? We need to support each other just as much as supporting your mother in this time.” I took my father’s cordial words to heart, and decided that he was right. Even if this man, or thing, were to try and harm our family, we would not allow it. Our family bond was so strong that even if he was the Devil, he wouldn’t be able to break it; no matter how hard he tried. My father and I had a fine meal that night of lamb steak and boiled potatoes, and both smoked our pipes by the fireplace and conversed and bantered to ease our minds. It was a great night; my father and I had become even closer. That was the night that family truly was everything, even if one member is slipping away in a special time of need. My father and I soon digressed, and decided to go to bed and get some rest.

## V

That night, when I placed my head on my pillow and looked at the grandiose moon shining in through my single-pane window, I had a dream. A dream with great a stature that I will never have again. A dream so vivid and lucid that to this day, I can still recall everything that happened in it; and what had happened when I had awakened. This was a dream that changed my life, and also changed my perspective on life and death. A dream of the duality between the subconscious and perceived reality.

I was walking along the same exact road that I had been walking on the day before to go to the Connelly's. Same road, same trees, same wildflowers, and same decrepit stone walls. Only something was different, and somewhat disturbing; everything was a shade of grey, including the sky. All of the once-vibrantly colored tree blossoms and wildflowers were all now a tint of bland and monotonous grey, and the once green and swaying grass was now grey and completely still. The sky was overcast with thick grey clouds that seemed to spiral and oscillate over a certain point in the area. There was also a very eerie silence that seemed to emanate throughout the entire landscape. Not a single noise was to be heard; by or from anything. Life seemed to be in a stand-still, almost feeling like I was lost in some sort of paradox or purgatory. During this entire time, perfectly described as a phenomenon; I had not the faintest memory of walking down this road. It seemed to be illogical, seeing as I had just walked down this path in real life the day before, but I did not recollect or feel this observation whilst having the dream. As I continued down the road, I began to feel more and more anxious and uneasy. I realized that I could not even hear my shoes clacking against the hard cobblestone road, and I could not even hear myself breathe. I tried to talk, and then scream, but again; nothing.

I looked into the sky again, and the spiraling clouds were now more pronounced and clear that something was in the middle of the oscillation. I kept moving up the path and started to make my way towards the middle of the colossal circle of clouds. Once I became close to the middle, I saw it. I saw him. I saw the tree that he had stood under once before. I saw the pond that he glared into; only this time no shimmering or dancing signs of light. The water was completely still and motionless. Right as I became aware of his existence, he was aware of mine. I could barely make it out, but he was facing directly towards me; still, motionless and foreboding as a monolith. I slowly paced away from the cobblestone, and cautiously made my way over to him. As I progressed closer and closer, I could hear the sound of birds chirping and singing very faintly. As I got closer, the singing became louder and more apparent. The man was still donning the same apparel as I had always seen him in, only this time; a cigarette was nowhere to be seen in his possession. I slowly made my way closer to him and finally came close enough to be considered appropriate for conversation. I realized that the bird's singing was that of a Coal Tit; a small bird that I had seen many times in my mother's favorite place to be: her garden. She worked very hard to keep it top-shelf, and the innocent little songbirds were the most frequently seen bird in her garden. I looked up and saw their nest, and saw a mother feeding the chicks as they vigorously flapped their wings and adamantly chirped for whatever reason. I looked back down to meet the man's eyes once again. He still said nothing, only standing there with a stone-cold impression on his face. I started.

"Who... who are you?" I asked. But this time, I asked it with the utmost sincerity. I really wanted to honestly know who this man was. Not only was he making unexpected appearances in my life, he was now in my dream. Not only that; he was the subject and the object of my dream. "You know who I am, Aed. Or should I say 'what' I am," he replied. "No, I really don't sir, and I now know that you are a 'what'.

No man that has ever walked this Earth could ever do mystical and mysterious things such as this; or any of the other things that you have done. I honestly want to know what you are.” He stared at me, seeming to be a stare of contemplation. “Do you really wish to see what I am, Aed? Some find me fearful, while some find me pleasant.” I looked at him, and really thought about what he had just iterated to me, but I had already made my decision before I had met him under that tree. “Aye, sir; I really do. Help me put this puzzle together.” He looked at me, and cracked out a genuine smile; something that I’ve never seen him do in my time of knowing him.

Just then, the mother had fallen from the nest onto the ground, and had been badly hurt. She was frantically squawking and dragging her belly on the ground, appearing to have a broken wing beyond repair. The sound was horrendous and heartbreaking. At that point, the man slid one of his sheathed hands out from his coat pocket and slowly bent down to pick the bird up, veiling his trademarked eyes with the brim of his cap. He squatted there for a moment or two examining the bird in his hand, which had seemed to exponentially calm down ever since he picked it up. He stood again, holding the bird in his hand by his midsection, still shrouding his eyes with the cap. “This is what I am, Aed,” then he lifted his head to look at me. What I saw still haunts me to this day and makes me weak in the knees.

His eyes had gone from the natural humanistic eyes with the color of blue to an insidious and nightmarish black. Not just any black, a black of true and honest evil; to which it seemed at the time. A black so powerful and encapsulating, that it startled me so that I had fallen straight onto my backside, and I again could not break eye contact with him as he looked at me. The nature of his eyes had gone from seemingly formidable to honestly horrifying; unlike anything that I had seen before, or ever will see in my lifetime. I was so petrified that I could not say a single word, and I wouldn’t have been able to even if I tried my hardest. He slowly opened his mouth and uttered, “This... this is what I am Aed.” He then went on to say phrases that an old poet John Donne had once said. “I am a slave to my own work, Aed. There is no home for me. I will never be able to stop my work, for I will be employed for the rest of eternity. I am the son of Lucifer, and the brother of Sin. But I am not the Devil, Aed.” I finally scrounged some courage to add to the conversation, and the words staggered out of my mouth. “You’re... you’re Death... aren’t you?” He looked away from me and down towards the suffering bird, to which I did as well. “Yes, I am, Aed. Do not be afraid of me. People fear death and think of me as some sort of evil entity or a harbinger of pain and suffering; when in reality I am the opposite. I release people from their pain. I release people from their suffering. I am nearly the boatman that helps them cross the harbor into the afterlife and salvation. People have no reason to fear death, Aed; for death itself dies in the end. Life continues even after death.” I started to finally understand. I started to understand why he had made appearances in my life, and why he was now in my dream explaining this to me. But I was still unclear on one thing, so I asked. “I understand this, but why do people still fear and hate you, and live life with no regard to your existence? Why do people tend to ignore you?” He paused, and then revealed his other hand from his coat pocket. His other hand was grotesquely different.

It was black, skeletal, and very sharp and pointed at the end. He slowly and cordially brought it up to meet with the back of the suffering bird, and grazed the tips of his fingers across the bird's body. "Because life is a beautiful lie, and I am a painful truth," he said, as the bird peacefully stopped her chirping, and seemed to nuzzle like a newborn babe into death's cold palm. He again slowly squatted down and set the bird at the base of the tree, looked at it for a minute, then stood back up and looked at me. "My work here is done, Aed. Keep being the person that you are becoming. Your name parallels what you do for people. You help them. You're caring. You're considerate. You'll go out of your way to find help for a friend in need. Keep doing this young man, because I will be watching. We will meet again." I was still on the ground looking up at him, and I saw the sky finally open up to see an overwhelming white light shine down. He turned and started to walk into the pastures, and I could only see him for another second, as I was blinded by the increasing light. I then awoke from my dream, and it was the morning.

I had a pleasant feeling that morning, almost as if a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. It was a beautiful day, the birds were chirping, and everything was colorful. I never thought that I would've been so glad to see color once again. I slipped on my robe and shoes, opened my door and walked out into the kitchen to start breakfast to help my father. When I was reaching to my right for a pot, I noticed my father sitting in the living room by the fireplace; feet propped up on an ataman, and smoke peering over the top of his head from his pipe, for I could only see the back of him. "What's going on, Father?" I asked, even though I had a hint of an idea of what had happened. He said nothing, so I came over to meet him and ask again face to face. I came around to see his face, and he was crying. He wasn't sobbing by any means, but his eyes were red, his brow was furrowed, and his face was wrinkled from what was probably previous emotional relief. He looked up at me and said with a trembling voice, "She's gone, Aed. She's gone." I couldn't believe it, and I felt my own eyes began to swell, so I made my way to my mother's chamber and opened the door. The door had never creaked so loud. I walked in and once again knelt beside her. I put my finger to her throat to check a pulse, but there was indeed none there. I was mortified to see that she had passed. I couldn't believe that such a dear woman could have passed so young. I began sobbing uncontrollably and buried my head in her neck. Then for some reason, I didn't feel like crying anymore. I felt the need to pick my head up and look into her eyes one more time. I did, and what I saw had shocked me.

There was more life to her eyes at that moment than I had seen in them for years. They truly looked relieved, almost like she had been released from some sort of entombment. She also had a slight wrinkling under her eyes, and when I looked down to her mouth, she had the ever so slightest smile on her face. She had been saved

She had been released. She had been given the opportunity to start over and live in paradise. This was when it all came together: the man, the bird, the dream; it all made sense.

My dear mother had been suffering for the longest time despite how hard my father and I tried to comfort her; her suffering was inescapable. But now she was released from all of it, and I felt the most overwhelming sense of relief and happiness for her, while I still felt somber about her being gone. It was a perfect balance of emotion; one that I had not felt in quite some time. I stood up proudly, then walked back out to the living room and told my father to stand. He did, and I hugged him harder than I ever have before. We stood there for about five minutes, but it honestly felt like an eternity. "Everything's going to be all right, Aed," he said, stroking my hair. "I know it is, father. I know."



## *Drama*



"Running Horse" by Charla Stickland

# Mara Martinson

## *A Night in Paradise—Act One*

Setting: 1965. On the side of a country road 10 miles from the nearest town. Night.

Characters:

CHARLOTTE                      Female, early 20's.

SEBASTIAN                      Male, late 20's.

Scene 1

(Single white light on CHARLOTTE who is at the front of the stage, there is a prop car stage center not illuminated on a gravel road, trees surround the road)

CHARLOTTE is running/limping on the side of the road, crying. She waves over a car and slowly runs backwards to meet up with the car on the stage. SEBASTIAN is driving and turns the wheel to the right. CHARLOTTE opens the passenger door and quickly jumps in.

(The stage is dark, two white lights turn on over CHARLOTTE and SEBASTIAN in the car, stage center, there is the sound effect of the car idling and two dull headlights expel from the prop car)

CHARLOTTE: Thank you, thank you so much! I haven't seen a car on this road yet and I've been out here for over an hour. I don't even know where we are.

SEBASTIAN: What on earth happened to you?

CHARLOTTE: I (slight pause) I don't want to talk about it. (CHARLOTTE twists her body to look through the back window) I just need to get to a police station.

SEBASTIAN: Why? What happened to you? Where did you get those bruises and black eyes? (SEBASTIAN points to several areas on CHARLOTTE'S face) Did someone hurt you?

CHARLOTTE: Can we just go? Please start driving. NOW! I don't want to be followed.

SEBASTIAN: Look around you, we're in the middle of nowhere. I can assure you we won't be followed by whoever you're scared of.

CHARLOTTE: Okay, but can we go? I'd like to get somewhere safe.

SEBASTIAN: But you are safe. You're with me. (SEBASTIAN grins)

CHARLOTTE: I don't even know you. Come on. (CHARLOTTE frantically pushes SEBASTIAN) Let's go!

SEBASTIAN: I'll only start driving if you tell me what happened to you. And don't leave out any details. I'll know if you do.

CHARLOTTE: You'll know?

SEBASTIAN: Well yes. (SEBASTIAN pauses) I can easily tell when people are lying or withholding information from me.

CHARLOTTE: (CHARLOTTE looks at SEBASTIAN quizzically) That's highly unlikely.

SEBASTIAN: No it's not. I'm a very perceptive person.

CHARLOTTE: Okay, you're perceptive. Whatever. Let's go! (SEBASTIAN pulls out onto the road)

(The sound effects of a car accelerating and gravel rocks)

SEBASTIAN: So, tell me.

CHARLOTTE: What?

SEBASTIAN: Your story.

CHARLOTTE: My story?

SEBASTIAN: Yes, perhaps why you're evasively ignoring my questions.

CHARLOTTE: I just don't want to talk. (CHARLOTTE touches her bruised eyes and winces) I've had a rough night.

SEBASTIAN: Okay, let's talk about that.

CHARLOTTE: No, I just said I don't want to talk. It's also none of your business.

SEBASTIAN: Well, I guess you can say my driving you to the police station is none of my business. I can just drop you off out here.

CHARLOTTE: You wouldn't leave me out here alone. And even if you do, I can just walk. It may take me awhile but I'll get where I need to go.

SEBASTIAN: Yes, maybe. But you did say before that you don't know where you are. You were walking for over an hour remember? Perhaps in the wrong direction? (SEBASTIAN raises his shoulders) It could take you days to get to any sort of civilization and maybe by that time, the person you're running from could find you and cause you more damage. (CHARLOTTE grimaces) And then you would wish you had accepted the handsome stranger's request in telling him a little about your life in exchange for a safe ride.

CHARLOTTE: (CHARLOTTE looks out her window and sighs) Okay, you got me. How far are we from the police station anyway?

SEBASTIAN: Not too far.

CHARLOTTE: Great.

SEBASTIAN: What's your name?

CHARLOTTE: Charlotte

SEBASTIAN: Last name?

CHARLOTTE: That's irrelevant.

SEBASTIAN: It's just a simple question. I'd like to remember someday the name of the person I drove to safety.

CHARLOTTE: It's Montgomery now.

SEBASTIAN: Now?

CHARLOTTE: Yes, and should I even bother asking what your name is?

SEBASTIAN: Yes, my name is Sebastian. Sebastian Whitmore.

CHARLOTTE: Super. (CHARLOTTE looks at SEBASTIAN annoyed)

SEBASTIAN: I take it you're married?

CHARLOTTE: Yes, I've been married for about two years now.

SEBASTIAN: Was he involved in your beating bag appearance?

CHARLOTTE: Yes (CHARLOTTE begins to cry)

SEBASTIAN: I'm sorry to hear that (SEBASTIAN tries to hold her left hand but she shakes him off)

CHARLOTTE: Please don't touch me. I'm not an injured bird. I'm a strong woman.

SEBASTIAN: I'm sorry, I thought you might want some physical contact.

CHARLOTTE: Not from you.

SEBASTIAN: Okay, but what happened? It must have been bad if a self-proclaimed strong woman like yourself would allow someone to hurt you so badly.

CHARLOTTE: Well, it wasn't always this bad. When my husband and I first started going steady he was so sweet and chivalrous. But, after we got married he got angry easily and then it turned to physical violence.

SEBASTIAN: How long had he been physically abusive to you?

CHARLOTTE: A year.

SEBASTIAN: Why didn't you report him or separate from him earlier?

CHARLOTTE: He said he would change. After we got married, we wanted to experience city life. So, we moved to Chicago. That's where it all started. He was always agitated and verbally abusive. He would constantly apologize when his aggression got out of hand and I would forgive him. He would blame the loud city as the root of his anger and suggested that we move to the quiet country to live peacefully. And, I agreed.

SEBASTIAN: (SEBASTIAN looks disgusted) Why did you move away with him?

CHARLOTTE: I loved him and wanted to make it work.

SEBASTIAN: That was your first mistake.

CHARLOTTE: Perhaps, but when we moved out here he got even worse. Any mistake I made would warrant a beating from him.

SEBASTIAN: And you didn't think to leave him?

CHARLOTTE: I did, but deep down I thought he would change. I wished so badly that he would go back to the way he once was.

SEBASTIAN: But, he didn't.

CHARLOTTE: No, he didn't.

SEBASTIAN: What mistake did you make tonight?

CHARLOTTE: I burnt the chicken I was making us for dinner.

SEBASTIAN: And for that, he did this to you? (SEBASTIAN points to her bruised eyes)

CHARLOTTE: Yes.

SEBASTIAN: How did you manage to get away?

CHARLOTTE: I (CHARLOTTE pauses) I knocked him out with a frying pan.

SEBASTIAN: (SEBASTIAN pulls the car to the side of the road and turns off the engine)

(Sound effects of driving on gravel and a car engine turning off)

That bastard had it coming. He was awful.

CHARLOTTE: He was? What do you mean?

SEBASTIAN: Don't be coy. You know he's dead right?

CHARLOTTE: I don't know, I ran away.

SEBASTIAN: He's dead.

CHARLOTTE: What? You don't know that!

SEBASTIAN: I do.

CHARLOTTE: You just picked me up. You have no idea what you're talking about.

SEBASTIAN: No, I was watching you two. You have no idea how many times I wanted to help you. But, I wanted you to try to kill him yourself so I could be certain.

CHARLOTTE: What? Certain of what? You're crazy, you've been watching me?

SEBASTIAN: Of course I have. I've been patiently waiting for you to strike back at him. I've watched you two and waited for you to get rid of him to be with me.

CHARLOTTE: Let me out! (CHARLOTTE incessantly pulls on the car door handle that is locked) I was only protecting myself. I've never seen you before.

SEBASTIAN: Of course you have. We've seen each other at the grocery store in town and through your living room window. We've made eye contact several times honey.

CHARLOTTE: I'm not your honey! Are you delusional?

SEBASTIAN: Don't you see Char, now we can be together. You made it so. (SEBASTIAN clasps CHARLOTTE'S hands in his)

CHARLOTTE: (CHARLOTTE shoves SEBASTIAN towards the driver's window)  
Get away from me! You're insane!

SEBASTIAN: I know you're mad at me. I'm sorry it took me so long to find you out here. I had to finish him off and get rid of the body first. I hope you can forgive me Char.

CHARLOTTE: Quit calling me that you psycho! (CHARLOTTE frantically starts pounding on the car window) Help! Someone help me!

SEBASTIAN: Char, quit joking around. Just tell me that you love me too!

CHARLOTTE: (CHARLOTTE continues to pound on the window) No! No!  
NOOOOOOOOO! Help! Someone! Please! (SEBASTIAN slams CHARLOTTE'S head into the window knocking her unconscious, and sets her head against the passenger window)

SEBASTIAN: It's okay my lovely, we're going home. You just rest your beautiful head. I love you so much Charlotte. (SEBASTIAN kisses CHARLOTTE'S forehead, starts the car, turns the wheel to the left to get back onto the road, and drives)  
(Sound Effects: Car ignition, car acceleration, and gravel. The two white spot lights gradually turn off as SEBASTIAN continues to drive)

# ***Creative Non-Fiction***

# Sydney Chipman

## “It Starts with a Cigarette”

*I'm waking up to ash and dust  
I wipe my brow and I sweat my rust  
I'm breathing in the chemicals*  
\*\*\*

*Welcome to the new age...*  
-Imagine Dragons ‘Radioactive’

I imagine the future, my home town in the Midwest destroyed by the carelessness of humanity.

The soles of my shoes sink into the dead, withered grass. I stop and stare, a wisp of hair blowing into my face, which I quickly brush aside, smearing ash across my pale cheek. The fire is no longer and either is the forest.

It wasn't a plague, but it spread like one.

That's how typical apocalypse stories begin, with a sickness or a plague that destroys the population and sometimes makes people rise up again and eat other members of their race. We've coined the term 'zombie.' We live and breathe through apocalyptic novels and movies, convinced that the end of the world will have nothing to do with us, but in my opinion, the world will only end because of the carelessness of humans, the total disregard of the natural world we are allowed to live in.

It started with the actions of one person, and then another and another. Actually, it started with a cigarette.

The first commercial cigarettes were made in the 1860s and it wasn't until almost a hundred years later when the harmful effects on health were becoming known. We've known about these effects for a long time now, it's why many of us chose not to smoke and why countless others tried to stop. I learned about it in school, through health classes, smoking, drugs and alcohol awareness programs, and of course, my parents. It was pounded in my brain and it's been embedded there ever since, but what I didn't learn somehow seems more important because I'm presented with the truth of it now as I walk through this wasteland I used to call my home.

Recently, cigarette smoking dropped by twenty-eight percent in America, but cigarettes remained the most littered item in America and the world. Humans had the choice to let toxins into their body when they smoked a cigarette, and they also had the choice to release these harmful toxins into the environment, poisoning the nature around us, a choice they shouldn't have found hard to make.

What lies before me now is ash. It covers the land like dust that has been settled for some time, only disturbed when I walk through it, becoming dark clouds that wrap around my ankles, threatening to swallow me whole. I wasn't here when this area was destroyed, but I knew what it once was. The Superior Municipal Forest. 4,400 acres of natural beauty, a boreal forest, containing white and red pines, balsam, cedar, black spruce, white birch and aspen. It was the third largest forest within a city



in the nation, and now it's just a pile of ashes, a black haze.

Every once in a while, on my journey through here, I have to step over the remains of a tree that isn't quite burned into an oblivion. Somehow seeing what's left of it is worse than if it were just gone, a pile of ash, because it's a reminder of what we've done as a race. The white birch trees I once posed by for a grad photo my senior year of high school and were told that you could scratch messages onto the tree bark with a stick, were carcasses, half burned, forever suffering. I imagine the edges of the photo burning, the messages I wrote fading as embers take away the memories, the meaning which we give to our lives.

The beauty of the forest began to dissipate over time, like any other place. Mostly because of human action, the root of the problem. It was evident when snow began to melt away after a long, harsh, northern Wisconsin winter.

I remember walking into my college campus the day after I discussed with friends how our school was the only one that wasn't smoke free in the area. Spring was finally beginning to grace us with its presence and it started with melting away the snow and showing all that was underneath. The contradictory element of this experience is one I have trouble relaying. With the beauty and elegance of the changing of seasons provided by nature, our true human nature was exposed. Hundreds of cigarette butts were uncovered, having been there since the start of the semester in September, or longer.

Not only does this kind of litter take away from the aesthetic value of the place, it's dangerous to the environment. Filters on cigarettes are made of a form of plastic, cellulose acetate, which is very slow to degrade in the environment. Cigarette butts take anywhere from two months to ten years to decompose depending on environmental conditions. These filters are on cigarettes to absorb the 165 toxic chemicals that are not supposed to enter the lungs, including cadmium, arsenic and naphthalenes, used in rat poison, batteries, explosives and moth balls. These contaminants are carelessly released into the environment by the ignorance of humans.

And now, here in the forest, many more cigarettes litter the ground. While wildfires are a natural event in which ecosystems adapt and renew themselves, fires caused by discarded cigarettes are not a part of this natural process. These fires unnecessarily destroy what has already burned and renewed itself in nature, causing extreme amounts of fires that are not healthy for the environment.

Countless house fires have been started from indoor smoking, but many fires are the result of littered cigarettes in the environment. Careless smoking is estimated to be the number one cause of fire related deaths and injuries. And in this case, the forest is the one that suffered.

In January of 2001, someone driving in San Diego County, California, flicked a cigarette onto a median, producing a fire that burned more than 10,000 acres of land and 16 homes. A cigarette-caused fire is also one of the largest forest fires in Canadian history.

I imagine these cigarette butts as seeds, poisonous seeds that infiltrate the dried up soil of the earth and instead of bringing rebirth to the forest, make this beautiful landscape a graveyard.

My feet ache as I continue through the forest and eventually peer down at the Pokegama River. Instead of feeling at ease by the water, I cringe. I yearn to pull off my worn sneakers and ash-ridden clothes and let the river cleanse me, but I do not dare. Water was once something that could cleanse, purify and soothe. We pictured no better way to end a day than with a swim. My day does not end with a swim, and it never will again.

The once pure, blue river situated in the forest is now foggy and tinted brown. A sign reads "Do not swim. Water contaminated."

Not only are these poisonous chemicals from cigarettes posing a threat to the land, the danger of them are amplified when they are carried into bodies of water.

The Pokegama River enters the Superior Municipal forest and empties into the Pokegama Bay and the St. Louis River near Lake Superior. It flows through Dwight's Point, the largest of the narrow, steep ridges that border it, and through the Pokegama Wetlands. The area was claimed a State Natural Area in 1994. I imagine what it must have looked like then.

The site was home to rare fish species and plant life and it was protected by the Bureau of Endangered Resources, a priority to preserve because of its high-quality wetlands. I see rare frogs and toads such as the wood frog or American toad hopping in and out of the wetlands as a researcher trekked through the marshy lands, rubber boots sinking into the marshy land as a yellow warbler flew overhead.

The wetlands are silent now, somehow echoing more than any noise I've ever heard. Nearly 80 percent of marine debris come from land-based sources. 4.3 trillion cigarette butts are littered annually and 32 percent of litter at storm drains are tobacco products. These cigarettes are carried off by rain into these drains and eventually run off into lakes, rivers, wetlands and other sources of water. This type of pollution is called non-point source pollution, part of a result of human activities on land that cannot be identified from a single source. This has harmful effects on drinking water supplies and wildlife. Ingestion of plastic cigarette filters is a serious threat to wildlife and are often found in the intestines and stomachs of dead or extremely ill turtles, birds, fish and dolphins.

I can't count any fish in the murky waters of the river and the chirping of birds is non-existent. It's a sound I've tried to commit to memory, but have ultimately failed to do so. The lively sounds fade along with the rest of my treasured memories.

A lab study done at San Diego State University showed that single cigarette butt soaked in a liter of water for a day resulted in bad water quality and the death of 50 percent of the fish within that water.

Cigarettes litter the bank of the river and I kick at one with my shoe, wishing that I could go back, that we all could, and save our environment.

My throat is dry, as if I've swallowed dust. Not only do I want a swim, but I want a drink. I want that quenching of thirst that only water can provide, but finding fresh water is difficult now. In a place home to the biggest of the Great Lakes and the largest body of fresh water, Lake Superior, I never thought I would

happen upon this problem. Every day I poured water from the faucet in my kitchen to drink without a second thought. I'd heard of drinking water problems, of course, and I'd been on vacation to Florida, where I'd tried to drink water from the tap as I always did and was disgusted at the taste. There was nothing quite like the water up here and there never will be ever again.

I remember my first swim in Lake Superior. It was a warm day, but the water was cold as I dipped my feet into it. My sister coaxed me from a few feet out in the water, claiming that "the water was fine the further you went in." It wasn't the biggest lie she ever told. My dad taught me how to skip a rock standing on the shore of Lake Superior and my mom and I walked along collecting heart-shaped rocks that I used to fill my pockets to the brim.

Simpler times. Beautiful times.

I walk along the bank of the river, continuing my journey until I reach the highway. What's behind me is ash. A wasteland.

This is the new age, and I don't want to be a part of it.

# David Tromblay

## “Love Leaves Scars”

-Stephen King

I’ve sat through numerous nuptials. I’ve stood through more than I’ll admit here. Each and every time someone regurgitates that proclamation of all that love is—patient, kind, envious, et cetera, et cetera—be it the officiant or some poor soul appointed by the bride. The last iteration of this I was made to sit through caused me to let go a snicker. And while I’m sure Paul’s intentions were pure, but I’d be more inclined to side with Boudleaux Bryant, *Love Hurts*.

If you were to look above my left eye, you’d notice a deep scar separating my eyebrow in two halves. I earned that scar in Sunday school, of all places. No one would ever expect to become a victim of a random act of violence in God’s house, but I did. It was during the fifth grade; I was already well into my last big growth spurt and by the end of the seventh grade I’d reached my adult height of five feet, nine inches tall. So, I think it is fair to say I was big for my age. Few would argue. There was only one other fifth grader, so we were made to sit in with the sixth graders.

Back then, I was still naïve concerning matters of the heart, but I would soon be educated. She was blonde, that much I remember. She flirted with me in the usually aw-shucks way most kids do when they’re still of that age. I was as unresponsive as I was unawares. So what’s a girl to do when she is vying for the attention a boy who either won’t give the attention sought or hasn’t noticed her in that way? Regardless of her sweet and innocent intent, things quickly unraveled.

She pushed me, when I wasn’t looking her way, knocked me off balance, and into one of the metal folding chairs, head first. I hit that chair very, very hard. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, and such. I hit the metal hinge with the corner of my brow. And it folded, as it was meant to do, and it slammed shut on my meat of my eyebrow. I don’t remember separating myself from the chair or if I even had to nor do I remember anyone helping me out of that little predicament, but I do remember a minute or so later, standing in the center of that now largely silent room with a hand held tight against the source of the searing pain, listening to and ignoring the repeated requests of Mr. Anderson until it became more annoying than not being let alone.

When I finally let him look at it, I didn’t see his reaction. Instead I watched the blood that had pooled in the palm of my hand fall toward the floor as the room erupted in the multitude of childish reactions along with an arguably forgivable occurrence of taking the Lord’s name in vain. And that sweet young lady who had caused all this to happen scurried on over the wastebasket sitting alongside the piano and began to wretch—be it from disgust or guilt, I not rightly know.

We never spoke after that day.

# *Research Writing*



“Anxiety’s Influence on Conformity”

Abstract

Conformity is the action of a person altering their opinions and morals to match a dominant influence. The current study hypothesized that anxiety levels greatly influence conformity to social pressures. Twenty-nine Introduction to Psychology students at the University of Wisconsin-Superior participated in the study. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the strength of the relationship between anxiety levels and the likeliness to conform to social pressures. An independent samples t-test was conducted to evaluate whether a causal relationship exists between high and low levels of anxiety and likeliness to conform to social pressures. The purpose of the current study was to analyze whether different levels of anxiety influence conformity to social pressures. Since the results were not significant, conformity may be a form of a natural human behavior and not completely influenced by anxiety.

*Keywords:* conformity, anxiety, social-pressure, influence



## Anxiety's Influence on Conformity

By definition conformity is the action of a person altering their opinions and morals to match a dominant influence. Based on previous research, it is suggested that conformity is the most common social influence in America (Boundless, 2011). A primary cause of conformity is group social influence, however, anxiety also contributes to group conformity. Some people have such high anxiety that they feel the need to conform to group opinions so they do not appear to be different or because they fear a person's disapproval (Richards, 2014). Current research motivating this study states that those with higher anxiety are more likely to conform to popular opinions verses expressing their own opinions and beliefs.

A Theory of Conformity states that a person's status is dependent on them conforming to the societal norm rather than going against the norm (Bernheim, 1994). Bernheim found that a person's action isn't always their genuine choice. Because people are fearful of being ostracized by peers they conform to the popular opinion in given situations. Unfortunately, people are more willing to let go of their individuality in order to fit in with the majority (Bernheim, 1994).

Pronin, Berger, and Molouki (2007) conducted a study about conformity and how people perceive themselves being less likely to conform than they really are. The results also indicated that each participant rated themselves as less likely to conform compared to the other participants. In reality the results revealed that all the participants were similarly susceptible to conformity (Pronin et al., 2007). Participants were more susceptible to conformity when they were told about their peer's opinions before completing the given surveys. This may be an indication that the participants developed anxiety when going against the group norm.

Research conducted by Schry, Roberson-Nay, and White (2012) states that college students who experience higher amounts of anxiety tend to be less decisive. This suggests that students with higher levels of anxiety are more likely to conform because their intention is to avoid confrontation and judgment. The results of the previous study show that self-reporting of social anxiety among college student participants using multiple surveys is reliable and accurate. In order to explain how anxiety levels determine levels of conformity Schry, Roberson-Nay, and White (2012) used the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ; Meyer, Miller, Metzger, & Borkovec, 1990). This questionnaire provides the participant with general worry items and asks them to rate the items based on their natural behavior. The findings of this survey show a significant relationship between the participant's self esteem and their level of perfectionism. Based on this data it is evident that the participant's concern of going against the social norm will lead to a loss of confidence. Therefore, conforming becomes their body's defense mechanism against anxiety.

In social situations, human beings are motivated towards making the best possible decision that will be both rewarding and correct regardless of their true beliefs (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2003). When a person is asked about their opinion, they will use their feelings as a cue to respond to the question. Cognitively, a person's

emotion will try to avoid giving any answers that may cause shame or fear (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2003). This is what causes someone to conform to the majority, even if the person doesn't agree with the majority. A person who has a higher anxiety level will be more pressed to not say something potentially shameful. If telling their opinion when opposite of the majority brings on an overwhelming fear it will lead them to conform to the social norm. The current study hypothesized that anxiety levels greatly influence conformity to social pressures.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Twenty-nine participants combined of Introduction to Psychology students and other on-campus students at the University of Wisconsin-Superior participated in the study. All students were compensated with a piece of fun-sized candy and the psychology student participants also received partial credit from their professor for their time contribution.

### **Materials**

Participants were asked to complete two surveys alone in a psychology lab. Both sets of survey items were measured using a five point Likert scale; ranging from 1 being highly anxious to 5 being not anxious at all and 1 being very true to 5 being not true at all. The first questionnaire, Social Anxiety Disorder Screening Questions created by Chartrand, Cox, El-Gabalawy, and Clara (2001), asked fifteen questions about different scenarios and settings that could cause anxiety such as, "Giving your honest opinion to a group," and "Giving your honest opinion to an individual." The second survey, Resistance to Peer Influence Scale (RPI) created by Steinberg and Monahan (2007), proceeded with thirteen questions about what types of settings and scenarios influence personal conformity such as, "I think it's more important to fit in with the crowd than be an individual," and "I wouldn't give my honest opinion on a controversial question because I wouldn't want to offend someone." Both surveys used for this study can be seen in (Appendix A).

### **Procedure**

First, participants were presented a consent form, which asked that they sign their name after completion and comprehension of the experiment overview and confidentiality statement. Upon agreement to all aspects of the experiment, each student was assigned to a lab room and given the first questionnaire. Once completed and put aside they were given the second questionnaire. To determine whether self-reported anxiety influences when conformity occurs each student completed the surveys in the consecutive order. Lastly, before leaving, each participant was given a debriefing and thanked for volunteering their time by receiving a piece of candy.

## Results

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the strength of the relationship between anxiety levels and the likeliness to conform to social pressures. There was no correlation between the two variables,  $r(29) = .069, p > .05$ . An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether a causal relationship exists between high and low levels of anxiety and the likeliness to conform to social pressures. The independent samples *t*-test comparing the mean scores of low anxiety participants and high anxiety participants found no significant difference between the means of the two groups ( $t(26) = .328, p = .05$ ).

The means and descriptive statistics for anxiety levels and conforming can be found in Table 1 (Appendix B). To define levels of anxiety a mean of 3 was calculated, meaning that self reported responses below 3 are classified as high anxiety and responses above 3 are classified as low anxiety. These results suggest that neither high nor low levels of anxiety have an effect on conforming to social pressures.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current research study was to analyze whether different levels of anxiety influence conformity to social pressures. Though this experiment has no significant results there is some consistency with prior research. It is evident that neither low nor high anxiety levels have an influence on the likeliness to conform to social pressures in different social groups or situations. However, these findings that provide support for Smith & Richards (1967) claim that conformity to group pressure is a form of defense against anxiety. According to this claim a person is going to conform when they are in a group because they do not want to be at odds with the majority in order to avoid feeling anxious (Richards, 2014). In relation to the current study, even though there was no difference in likeliness to conform based on anxiety levels, it is evident that when one is placed in a group and asked to complete a survey they will only do so once they see those around them complying to instructions. Since the results were not significant, conformity may be a form of a natural human behavior and not completely influenced by anxiety.

When considering strengths of this study, a person has both psychological and social qualities that define their character. With that said, a persons likeliness to conform to social pressures is more so ingrained in their personality. As stated in the introduction, people who have anxiety are not more likely to conform to social norms because they are pressed to not voice their opinions in order to avoid an overwhelming fear (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2003).

A limitation to the study is the lack of explanation behind the definition of both conformity and anxiety. Though people have a general understanding of anxiety and conformity, it is likely there is less understanding of the two together in terms of social factors on behavior. There are two types of conformity, normative social influence and informational influence (Bernheim, 1994). The current study specifically evaluated whether anxiety in the form of tension causes normative

social influence. This social influence happens when a person changes their own opinion to match the majority in order to gain acceptance (Dean, 2010). With the lack of explanation behind the definition and categorization of each variable it is likely that participants answered the survey questions without self-reflection.

The results of this study suggest future directions for research toward assessing a causal relationship between anxiety levels, self-doubt enhanced by anxiety, and conformity to social pressures. In particular, future research should consider whether self-doubt that is heightened in a group setting due to anxiety causes conformity. Self-doubt is considered a lack of confidence in one-self and is comparative to anxiety in the form of being apprehensive of one's own thoughts or personality. This research should allow participants to self-report their amount of self-doubt when in a group setting that asks them to state and explain their opinion on a specific topic. By assessing a person's self-doubt before and after answering and defending their opinion about a social norm to a group the link between anxiety and its relationship with causing conformity would be determined.

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