The Nemadji Review
Volume 6

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Dear Readers,

It is a great pleasure to introduce the sixth volume of The Nemadji Review. The editorial staff would like to thank everyone who submitted work to The Nemadji Review this school year. The quantity, as well as the quality, of submissions we receive has been incredible for the past several years, and this year was no exception. This has allowed our staff to select the best possible work to present in UW-Superior’s annual literary anthology.

The process to create this year’s journal was very long. Our editors have worked diligently for the past several months to ensure that every piece reflects a literary standard that UWS, as well as the community at large, can be proud of.

We hope to continue our tradition of showcasing the tremendous talent that our students and local residents possess. Thank you all again for your contributions and your readership. Without you, this anthology could not exist.

Therefore, we gratefully present Volume 6 of The Nemadji Review.

Sincerely,

The Nemadji Review Editorial Staff
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Fasing heats

squeezing hands

meaningless romance.

That last dance

rings on hands

oh the past future comes so fast.

Face of mask

no more chance

but waves wash back, feet feel trapped.

Under the tide they try to hide transparent water so cold they are lies.

So please don’t try

any more.

Keeping track I have no score I have no love all I have is pain.

So please let go of my hand dearest James.
The house I lived in was a house of recovery.
My father was a former alcoholic
And actually hadn’t had a drink since
before I was born.

There’s a lot of history that I don’t know about
That happened twenty plus years ago
And it’s probably better that I don’t.
After coming home from a night of drinking,
My dad would sometimes say that I should watch my step
Or else I’d get caught in the same web that he did.
I always like to keep that in mind.

My older sister, on the other hand,
Ignored my father’s words.
I’d prefer not to talk about that.
Growing up in my home I learned a lot about addiction,
And how there’s never really a “redemption” factor to it.

You don’t redeem yourself from addiction
Or the poor decisions that follow,
You just learn to live with it.
There’s an irremovable pit inside your stomach
That remains there for the rest of your life,
And all you’re able to do is to try not to make it any worse.
Megan McGarvey
“Mason Generation”

To the man I never knew, and the man I’ve known the best.

He was one a five, his eyes sincere, bright like charcoal,
Depth filled their murky iris.
   Lucid and full of fire.

He loved to fashion, to build.
Like a mason’s intuition sparking underneath the hearth embers
Fatherly arms, encasing calloused memories coated with a familiar hide.
His smile cascading over a Portland horizon, the genesis of an ocean morning’s brilliance.
A practical politician, he conversed in depth, articulate and friendly,
His hands clasped graciously at those tips, looking forward to what he could create, feeling them hiccup.

To leave something to drive past every Sunday, a Mason’s wall,
   A Father’s pride.
Eleven called him father, Wisconsin called him Berry.
Their eyes were like the ocean’s waves, endless in their gaze.
   His name is Jon, he was number five.

I am a descendent of a Mason generation.
   A daughter from a man of five,
I can see the depth in a cinder block.
   An ocean of history filled those cracks,
To create, I desire the feeling of clay encrusted upon my fingertips.

My father is worn, his fingers coated with callous scars; his name is Jon.
   The ocean is alive.
My mason jar breathes
Waking at five, seeing him on that balcony; eyes like glass reflecting waves.
   His father lives within the ebbing foam,
Sinking within the gray depths.

He whispered “Peace”, I nodded at the shore; sand appeared in my sandals like rubble.
   I could see the ashes flowing, five sick shreds.
I hear the cries over a Japanese base, the ocean echos.
   My father's distorted stricken face.
A tear spills over the precipice.
   The glass reflection shattered.
   A Mason's ruin.

To create a masterpiece to see its master destroyed, ruptures and maims spirit.
A new unspectacular crack upon a cinder block wall.
Another added layer of sediment making company in the depths of long forgotten memories.
His eyes were brown, the color of the earth, but his soul was water, growing with the moon hugging it like waves of the ocean sprinkling the shore with its touch.
    My Mason lives.
    He created me.
    Those tears shed,
    Dropped,
    grazing,
    Forming the depth of my eyes.
    A father’s trait, one can carry.
I have a eyes gingerly made, five fingers soft and eager.
My Father was number five. His smile dim with time, but his eyes full of a kindling fire.
    My Mason’s eyes reflected this,
    A sea in it’s depth,
    but left an ocean in its wake;
    One that I’ll never learn to regret.
“StarFly
(My Mother & I)”

In my room above my bed resides a star,
A star shaped lamp with intricate holes revealing its insides
   Perfect
   Warm
   Light.
Every night the star watches over my bed
Filling my room with light never running away into the night.
Last night I heard a sound, an annoying sound.
   A fly was in my star,
   a small black fly
It shook my star back and forth shaking it
   forcing it to shiver in pain.
   I felt bad for my star.
It didn’t deserve this intruder
   but it never had a choice.
It didn’t even shudder away from it.
   It accepted.
   Endured it.
This morning the fly is gone…
   But it’s different,
   there’s a mark
a shadow where a piece of light used to stream through
   that’s now bent
   it’s different
   It’s changed
I still love it all the same
   It’s still warm
   It’s still loving
   It’s just not the same.
Auriana Audette

“Where are you Grandma?”

Waiting.
Waiting.
Time stretches on.
On.
And.
On.
Where are you Grandma?

You’re supposed to be home by now. Why won’t you answer your phone?
Grandma, please pick up your phone.
This is my fault.
I shouldn’t have let you leave.
You seemed so emotional, anxious, confused.
I’ve never seen you like that Grandma.

I listened as my mom called the police.
Her voice quivered.
Her eyes glossy and sunken.
“My mom is missing”

Waiting.
Waiting.
Time stretches on.
On.
And.
On.
Where are you Grandma?

…. “Hello?”
“We found her”
Why didn’t you know your way home Grandma?

That was the day.
The day it changed forever.
The day I realized that THIS-
this, wasn’t going away.
The day where it seemed to come all at once.

I didn’t think it would get worse.
But it did.
She tells the same stories over and over.
She doesn’t remember the words to finish her sentence.
She can’t remember how to button her shirt.
She doesn’t know where we are.

She doesn’t know who I am.

Come back Grandma.
I miss you.
Please Grandma.
Please,
don’t let this disease happen to me.
Justin Thompson
“At The Foot of Barad Dûr”

No longer is the Traveler in the safety of the Greenwood
For all that lies ahead is fields of shadow and flame.

Weakness and sadness overtake the mind and heart
The burning eye atop the tower leaves nowhere to hide.

Foul beasts dwell in the deep and caverns
To serve and spare no one and only take command from The dark lord himself.

The blue sky is forever chocked by volcanic smog
The same fires from which the dreaded power Of Barad Dûr was forged.

No man, dwarf, elf or hobbit dare to approach this Evil fortress until a day came when One broke the tower’s cruel spell and grip on those who were free in Middle Earth.
“Letters of a Young Aspergian”

Never did I care much for the games of other children during my elementary years. Always I felt drawn to the wondrous philosophical, scientific, and political gathering of the adults.

Now I only concern my brain with what stimulates it- Trains, poetry, literature, astronomy, and mathematics. If anyone tries to tell me otherwise they are rebuffed- Unless their interests are the same, I am not interested.

Then there are those ignorant doctors and radicals who view Autistics as cases of treatment and pandemics just like introverts in an extroverted society. If only they were kind enough to viddy us Autistics on what feats we are able to accomplish rather than those we are not.

After all, has this gift that we’ve been blessed with by God that the ignorant refer to as a disease not worked for Einstein and Grandin? It’s also rumored to have worked for Mozart, Newton, and Darwin.

To those who have already accepted me- Mother, friends, cats, I am no genius, just a simple Aspergian like most others of my type looking only to nurture my brain with knowledge of things I cherish most.

I now take comfort that I am not alone in this extroverted world and wish upon any child, woman, and man on the spectrum that they are not alone as well.

My only with is that a day may come where Autistics are accepted as
people, not things or monstrosities by the ignorant minds of society.
Chad Hermans  
“Glory Glares”  

Draw back the curtains for what I have so pined.  
Hiding in garments, the taboo frame holds the body erect.  
Bones squabble over the jubilee.  
While road map veins protrude equivocally.  
Society glares in an appreciation so precarious.  
Light refracted begin scans instantaneously.  

Top-down interworking, our own mythology festers.  
Transformation has begun sculpting our precious minds.  
Our heart vulnerable to the deafening blow.  
Dramatic turns over, traumatic communally.  
We haven’t had a full belly in weeks,  
Even though saviors amongst us turn the cheek.  

Light glimmers the mirror apparatus, entrapment ensues.  
Waiting for the stagehand’s cue for the grandeur of you.  
Enticing, isn’t it?  
The bodybuilder grins squeezing the air out of the muscle.  
Years of hard work and struggle, well mostly.  
Yin and Yang waits showing the humble.  

The future depends on it, a broad definition.  
Convenience for them or they will kick and scream.  
This show reaches out, even though I may have lost you.  
Even thyself cries out to the font of this page!  
Be bigger, shine brighter, care more about the big picture.  
As my trembling, fragile wrists carry on.  
15 pounds later, the span of dual months.  
Inspection, dysmorphia, and sadness ripped to shreds.  
Starvation becomes me and glory glares.  
Grieving the loss of the breadwinner.  
Some may say I may have changed worse for wear.  
But I want you to know, I have been to every line of this play.  
Isn’t it enough character for a hero?
Gavin Johnson
“Bright Northern Lights”

Pull me away from this house-
this hot box of a house.
Pass me my most faded blue jeans.
Grab a sweatshirt for yourself.
You won’t stay warm in that sexy blouse.
Let me take you and show you
the sky of cool, colorful scenes.

We drive out into the woods.
We lay low and park.
We can’t see anything but us
waiting for a light show in the dark.

Let’s come together in my
black and green blanket.
We are now camouflaged in the dark.
My blanket is warm, too.
We better thank it
and pray for its
warmth and protection- But look!
A shooting star caught a spark.

Isn’t God an artist just for us
to start with a wall of army green
by a shooting star’s trace?
We better thank and pray for him.
It must’ve been on purpose
for him to see the look on your pretty face.

We are looking up into holy watercolors.
Do you think heaven has stain glass?
Angels really do shine through the skies.
We finally lay down on the grass.
Faith King
“Untied”

Words strewn across the canvas,
handler-skelter concepts
come undone, gone unheard.

Everyone secretly longs to be comforted.

As soon as we turned eighteen,
girls got words tattooed
wrapping around their calves,
or in a swirl across their shoulder blade.

All this to help us feel all right in a world of
Anxiety. Doubt. Fear.

Some words still make me feel better:
This week’s been rough though.
Deep summer heat,
I could feel the bad news coming,
and it did.

A woman like a mother is dying,
How will our hearts refill when she’s gone?
Her sweet and sassy influence:
wanting to tell us that life does
sometimes get rough.

Lost in reminiscence.
I gather words around me.
Sort them out on a tray,
trying to pick the right ones,
to glue on my collage,
to whisper in the ear of
those around me.

Sweating in my third floor bedroom,
I realize there isn’t a word
to ease the ache
of certain kinds of pain.
Sorry.
Melissa France
“Maybe Next Year”

The never told us, how tired we’d be;
How the weariness would seep into our bones.
They never told us how tired we’d be;
How we’d clip our own wings,
and forget how to fly.

The walls where hung our dreams and aspirations,
are now filled with obligations and expectations;
as we pretend to be who we think we ought.

We collect stars,
and put them on the window sill.
They glowed bright,
but grew fainter as we dulled our own light.

Every now and then, we take our wishes out.
Dust them off, and smile.
Maybe next year.
“The Hill”

Looking down below from atop of the hill, 
nothing has ever felt so real.  
In the distance a ship is blowing its horn, 
It will return by god’s almighty will.

I close my eyes and breathe in the air.  
I can feel the town running through my veins,  
from the lake to the Cathedral on the hill.  
For so long I’ve called this place my own,  
but for now it’s time to go.

I wander down from the hill and step on to the street.  
My feet will tell my heart where to go until it knows on its own.  
The birds are singing their song as I begin my journey toward the unknown.

The waves are calling my name, beckoning, trying to make me stay.  
And I whisper to them, someday.
Josh Terway
“The Conqueror Worm’s Kryptonite”

We’ve been beneath the skin of Mother Earth
Since before you, reader, were a thought of birth.
Commit to mind your most beloved pen passed;
We assure life beyond your tiny past.

Actions, of course, run their mortal course--
Words of such ride their eternal horse.

Our passion burns on forgotten shelves;
Here Bartleby, Roderick, and Goodman be.
Eternally awaiting our latest selves,
Amongst endless others, forever live we.

Passionate moments of existence fade--
Words of such an eternity made.

Our creators deceased, you have opportunity;
Live your life without hesitation.
Make your mark, you Walter Mitty.
Before death’s obsession ends your mission.

O, immortal are you to write;
The conqueror worm’s kryptonite.
“The 31st Of Youth”

Even as my fleeting follicles fail,
I miss the falling of her bright colors;
With her wind the strands of my life sail,
As my thoughts float to autumn’s mothers.
Even as my loving mother’s mind melts,
I miss her artful shifting of seasons;
We always loved her blazing pelts,
Orange, red and yellow without reasons.
Mother’s nature I love most in autumn,
Reminding me death comes sure as the night;
Yet I will burn bright before falling numb,
As I live in those youthful nights of fright.
I am always that young, blissful Vampire,
Gathering candy in a son’s empire.
Kelci Greenwood
“Pompeii”

This radiant cloudless day
contradicts the ruins all around us,
but imagine the black sky
raining stones upon our heads –
a mountain ripping itself apart.

Ignorance,
until it’s too late to run –
trapped beneath dented roofs,
burning under Vulcan’s rage.

The column falls.
Ash descends into every crevice;
buildings crumble and collapse.

Would the world forget us
if we disappeared for 1500 years?

Silent screams
greeted by the same sky
but a different time,
where a gleaming new city
stands, courting a dormant beast.
“The Pride of the Athenians”

Four structures stand atop this ancient hill. Statues are removed by men hard at work, sweating despite the early morning chill and coated in a thick layer of dirt.

The blue and white flag would be hard to miss – though it sits well away from the buildings – marking the peak of the Acropolis and the Greeks’ pride in its very being.

An olive tree grows near Caryatids meant to challenge the Parthenon’s grandeur. Scaffolding covers the large structure’s side, but its beauty and majesty endure.

Though it should be in better condition, the roof was blown off by the Venetians.
Short Fiction
Kourtney Sande
“Ghosts”

Looking out the passenger window
Mid-morning, 9:30
Waiting for Mom and Dad are getting ready
Cody’s tail wagging against my leg
It was late spring, maybe June
Eight years old.

Moving along the dingy streets, my converse fading from black to grey. The ghosts following me in my memories, as I tried walking past Randolph St. * Walking back from Johnny’s house, lighting up a menthol. Something that would try and help take the chills away. You think a person of 23 would be able to get to try it once and not feel like she is going to collapse next to the Grange.* Hoping my makeup will hold up my knotted mess of drenched hair during tonight’s storm. Only 5 more blocks. The fog closes in around me...

The old oak tree in the front yard.
Next to the old fishing boat,
The chipping grey paint on the back porch steps
Mom’s geraniums basking in the mid-morning sun.
Splashing in mud puddles as Mom is putting laundry on the line.
Dad is cussing over the truck again...

How the fuck did I even get the needles? Why the hell am I sitting next to a disgusting trash can? Shit. I feel so out of energy between the rain pouring on my now soaked mess of hair. If only I didn’t agree to being paid in drugs instead of money. Did Johnny even know how paying in cash should be typical for me? Jesus, these sneakers won’t last me until my apartment if I just sit here, with ghosts swirling in my head.

*Randolph street is a popular street along the downtown area of Chicago.
*Grange Hall Burger Bar, popular burger joint in the Windy City.

Fresh painted mud glitters on the fenders of the old Cheyenne.
I’m growing impatient, yet I am joyful.
My mom pulls my Rugrats sweatshirt over my head.
My blonde curls are disheveled as I run to wash up for lunch.
“What should we have for lunch?”
“Hot dogs and Mac ‘n’ Cheese!”

I’m crying. Two blocks from home and these ghosts just keep pushing past my barriers. As my soaked and black face turn the corner onto St. Alton Ave. My god, my boyfriend is going to shoot me. How am I going to explain $200 just showing up through my jeans? He is already probably pissed because I haven’t called or texted in 5 hours.
Now to begin my journey up the stairs, into another pit of hell. Can this day end already?

*Dad is pulling off his work boots.*
*Mom throws my sister the keys.*
*I sit on the kitchen corner trying to help Mom with lunch.*
*Kayla is trying to push me off so she can get to the soda.*
*Her brown curls make it easy so I pull on them as she is pushing me away.*
*Mom slaps both our hands away.*

“Oh get a grip…” He is following me throughout the cramped studio apartment. As I am trying to hide what is my rent money for the month, as well as buying textbooks for school.

“Seriously, 5 hours? How the hell am I supposed to keep track when you are constantly losing your phone. Why? Where? All the fucking questions”.

At this point, I am just stripping out of my soaked bra and panties trying to find my Rugrats pj pants.

“I am not sure how I can trust you. I want to know what you do for hours after work.. Can a guy worry, especially when she is dripping wet? I guess you didn’t get the 6 messages I sent…”

His ramblings are out one ear and out the other. I finally find my Rugrat pjs, try to ignore the brute right now and just get some hot cocoa and settle on the couch with Jane Eyre, and maybe get started on that creative writing assignment due in 3 hours.

As I went to the kitchen sink, I saw the raindrops splash against the pane of the fourth story apartment. My mind still reeling from just a few hours ago.

My eyes keep glancing at the needle pricks on my forearm.

The big brute walks into the kitchen and starts getting some ingredients from the fridge to make dinner.

“Is there any Mac n’ Cheese left from yesterday?” I call from the sink.

“Yeah,” he says. “Want me to heat it up for ya?”

“Please,” I said. I felt like the sink was holding me together, but the ghosts were not letting me go quite yet.

“Kayla called a few hours ago,” my brute says. My eyes suddenly go blank. My sister?

“Is everything ok?” I asked.

“She said your dad was in the hospital with a blood clot in his leg. You and I can go and see him if you want.”

My eyes start to water, as I go to the table, putting all my pathetic issues on hold, and the ghosts are finally starting to wither away. Thinking about her and Mom and Dad back home helps me realize I may have made a mistake. I pick up the phone and dial Kayla, and I go to the back of the apartment so he won’t hear me sob into the phone, as I am coming down from my high.

“Chicago? What’s so special there that you can’t see around here?”

Dad’s irritated. An 18 year-old can really make it outside small town walls.

“I want what’s best, but why 10 hours away? What happened to you wanting to be close to your mother and I?

“I love you both, but I had to make a choice. It wasn’t easy, but I had to. I need to at least try. I will call when I get there. Try not to worry, this writing school will help me. Columbia* will
give me the opportunities I have been dreaming. You will see.” A kiss goodbye on the cheek, a long hug that I didn’t want to let go. Another 10 hours to go. Maybe I am ready….

*Columbia College of Chicago is a private Creative Writing college on Michigan Street in Chicago.*
Patrick Slattery
“Discipline”

Winter sucks after Christmas time. Once the season of giving is over there is nothing left but cold and wetness. All we have left to do is try not to kill each other before spring comes around. Dad’s been acting too much like Jack Nicholson’s character in The Shining these days, always on my back about dinner etiquette and other silly things. He even hit me for using the lord’s name last weekend when I stubbed my toe on the counter. It seems so silly that he believes in a religion with such high morals yet he also believes he has to use violence to protect it. Against his own daughter even.

Once I got home my boots were ruined by all the black slush on the sidewalk. I don’t even care. I’m the only girl I know who doesn’t care about clothes, especially since I have to wear the same damn thing every school day anyway. I’m just waiting to get bitched at by father today. Sister Superior caught us smoking in the bathroom and ended up calling all of our parents about it. Like Jesus never enjoyed a cigarette. I wanted to avoid conflict so I head straight up to my room and lock the door, even though I’m starving. He’s not home yet, but he will be soon.

I take off my school clothes and put on a sweatshirt and sweatpants. I don’t understand why they have to make us wear something so itchy. It’s like I’m wearing fucking dry wall insulation and I keep getting a rash between my legs from walking everywhere. I just don’t understand why that place has to be so uptight in the first place! They make me feel like I’m such a bad person when I barely do anything wrong. If God is so all-knowing and loving, then why do all the nuns act like judgmental pricks!? Maybe I’m exaggerating things; after all it is the 21st. Being a woman isn’t as fun as it should be.

I’ve got exactly ten minutes until Dad gets home so I light up another one. I’m not stupid. I know they’re bad for me, but that’s exactly why I do it. I open up the window so I can blow out the smoke. The cool breeze mixes in with the warmness of my room and it feels like an ice cube dropped into a pot of boiling water. I imagine my father walking in on me right now while I’m smoking a cigarette, what a laugh that would be. The anger on his face would give me immense joy. *Your daughter is smoking a cigarette because of bad parenting skills. How could you let this happen?* I’ve always wondered if I could take him in a fight. I know I’d lose, but I’d like to know how well I’d do. He used to wrestle me when I was younger and he would always let me win every time, perhaps he still would.

Once I’m done with the cigarette I throw the butt out the window and spray Febreze throughout my room. Now it just smells like Febreze covering up cigarette smoke, so I leave the window open to let the fresh air sweep in. His car rolls into the driveway and something’s different. There’s a spare tire on the front right of the Pacifica. He must’ve gotten a flat on the freeway to work. It’s almost like I can tell by the dingy weather that none of this is going to end well. I keep my door locked and hide under the covers. It’s already getting dark outside.

“Sydney, do you want tell me about what happened at school today?”
I pretend like I’m not even home. I can hear his feet stomping up the stairs. Goddamn it I could really go for a frozen pizza right about now.

“You know how I feel about repeating myself, Syd. I just want to talk about this.”

“Go away.”

He wiggles the door knob back and forth. He stops for a moment and takes a big obnoxious inhale through his nose. I hate him.
“Are you smoking a cigarette right now!? You aren’t allowed to be smoking in this house! We did not raise you catholic to become a smoker. Open this door this instant”.

“I’m not smoking! You’re just imagining things”.

“I know cigarette smoke when I smell it, Syd. There’s no fooling me. You can either open this door or I can take off the hinges and you won’t have a door for the rest of your life. Do you want that?”

“Just fuck off already, will you!”

That got to him. Like I care about a stupid door. Right now it’s a battle of resistance and I’m winning. Hell, maybe I’ll light up another stick.

“That’s it, I’m grabbing the screwdriver. You’re doing this to yourself. If you want a repeat of last Wednesday, then by all means.”

He runs downstairs to the garage and I spark up my yellow lighter. Apparently yellow lighters are supposed to be bad luck. It’s been a long time coming now. This is no longer about cigarettes or swear words. This is about standing up against all the authoritative men in the world. I’m tired of living this way and frankly I don’t give a shit about what anyone thinks of me anymore. If he thinks as much as even laying a finger on me I won’t be tempted to punch him in the face. I hear him walking up the stairs again. Who knows if this man is even my father in the first place.

“Sydney, this is your last chance to open the door. If you do, I promise not to do anything. I just want to talk”

I’ve fallen for that one before.

“I’m going to count to three, and if this door doesn’t open, you’re going to be in big trouble. One… Two…”

“Three,” I interrupt. I can’t see it, but his face just turned a deep red.

“That’s it. Say goodbye to your door.”

I hear the vroom of the automatic screwdriver. The fun and games are over now. He’s going to beat me and he’s going to beat me hard. An ill wind blows in from the window and then it hits me. I can run away. I grab as many clothes as I can and stuff them into my backpack. I can stay at Cate’s house. Her parents are way more understanding than this prick. I hear a screw fall as I’m climbing out the window. A part of me wishes it didn’t have to end like this, but I know it’s for the best. Maybe this will teach him for being so strict.

I hear my father yell something as I climb up to the roof, but it’s too windy to decipher what he says. It’s freezing outside and the entire roof is covered in ice. Perhaps I should’ve worn my winter coat. The only challenge that remains is sliding down the drain pipe. I can hear my father removing the door now. He yells my name and I remain silent. This feeling is so stressful that I’m about to break. He runs to the window and looks outside and sees me standing on the roof. My initial feeling of rebellion has turned into fear. I was never one for heights.

“Sydney, what are you doing up there?! Get down from the roof this instant.”

“You have to promise not to hurt me.”

“What?”

“Promise not to hurt me and I’ll come down.”

“Syd, don’t be ridiculous. I’m not going to hurt you, I just want to talk. Now come down before you freeze to death.”

I give in. I have to. I start balling my eyes out and the tears freeze against my wind chilled face. I love my dad. I always have. I just don’t know what to think sometimes. I step back
towards my bedroom window. I tell dad that I’m sorry for being such a hassle and that I love him.

“I love you, too, Sydney. Now please, grab my hand.”

I reach for my father’s hand and my foot slips on the ice. As soon as I know it I’m lying face first in our driveway. Everything is so blurry and the only thing I can make out is that my legs are bent forward in front of me. The pain is so intense that I space out and then I feel nothing. Did I deserve this? Is this an act of God? Who am I to decide. I look up to see my father’s disappointed face before I fall asleep.
Bill Leighly had encountered many obstacles, had had to push many people out of his way, and had gone to some intimidating places in his life. He had never let anyone or anything give him any bullshit. But there was something…not right about this place. Something mysteriously unnerving. It was almost as if someone was peering at him down from the sky over this vast plain with menacing eyes and controlling him. This, of course, made Bill uneasy, even angry, because he just wasn’t the kind of person to be messed with. He was a tall, husky man with a flat top head with short, dirty hair. A bull. The kind of person that could stand anything or anyone.

He was standing in the middle of a vast, grassy field. He could recognize it, slightly; it seemed to resemble the large field that was in the back of the old elementary school. He could see the familiar pine trees in the distance. The town he had lived in as a child was kind of out in the sticks. Not many went off into that distant wilderness. Actually, one person had gone out there and never came back, but that was a long time ago and he was of no consequence.

But this childhood nostalgia was short lived. He had been agitated from the start. It was as if someone had placed him here. He didn’t like that. He felt angry enough to challenge God himself. His eyes had narrowed, his brow had crossed, his fist was clenched and shaking. Suddenly, he got a little cocky. “And the Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.’”

He smiled haughtily as he proudly recited one of the only parts of the Bible that he enjoyed quoting. He always thought of himself as being very Goliath-like. He had to admit that he was just a little uneasy when no answer came. Maybe he had just been paranoid all this time. Only, he wasn’t the kind of person who would get paranoid. Or, if he was, he would do something about it. But now he wasn’t sure. He had never encountered such an ethereal presence like this. He felt strange. Helpless. It seemed like many feet had trod this plain before. It reminded him of a war zone. It was as if he was a lone king on a chess board whose pawns, knights, bishops, rooks, and even queen had been conquered. But where was the enemy? The enemy was there. He felt sure of it, he knew that. It was as if he, or it, was waiting for a moment to descend out of the heavens with a glorious angelic army and wreak its vengeance upon him. But what did happen, he did not expect.

A child. A little, fair-haired, grey-eyed smiling boy was seen in the distance walking toward Bill from across the plain. He had a pure, almost disturbing cherub-like quality to him that seemed to Bill almost like a rococo church ceiling artwork cliché. The child’s eyes flashed as he daintily skipped across the rough, treacherous plain. Bill didn’t exactly like kids so he didn’t often pay attention to them. But there was something about this kid that awoke something within him. Was it someone he had known in elementary school? A friend maybe? It was hard for Bill to tell, but it looked like the child was making a faint wave of his hand. It was as if he was beckoning—not to Bill, but to something behind him. . .

It was a bear. A big, shaggy, black bear. Bill lived in the Midwest, and he had hunted there too, so he knew what he was looking at was not only a fine but a very dangerous specimen. Bill would have gotten a thrill out of hunting it and killing it. It looked like the bear could easily do the same to him. Or to that kid. Is he crazy? One swipe from his claws could send that kid’s little smiling blonde head off of his body. But that wasn’t happening. It was almost as if the child was leading the bear. He just continued smiling.
Another bear. And another. And still more. What?! More and more bears were sauntering out into Bill’s view. But what was most inexplicable to Bill was that they were all going in a straight line. And they were following the boy.

Well it’s not my problem if the kid gets torn limb from limb, thought Bill, getting just a bit agitated. He could have sworn he had seen this kid before. He has a familiar face. But those bears are getting closer. . .

What’s that? Bill caught sight of some objects gliding down out of the sky in graceful circling descents. They had long, brown, majestic wings, hooked beaks, and big, dauntless, staring eyes. Are those... eagles? Bald eagles?! Some were alighting on the ground and following the procession; others were landing on the backs of the bears and hitching rides, their claws apparently causing no harm to their hides. More were descending out of the sky from all directions like avenging harpies, their eyes gleaming. Other animals of all shapes and sizes were swarming out of the distance and falling in line with the bizarre parade that appeared to be marching in step with that little blonde brat of a ringleader.

Bill suddenly had a realization. It was a dream; just a bizarre dream that had probably been brought on by drinking too much beer. In fact, he was probably passed out in his girlfriend’s apartment right now. But why was he so disturbed by a silly-ass dream about a bunch of animals and a kid? He blinked. He shook his head. He shook his body. He pounded his foot on the surface of the dusty plain. No. It was no use. He was locked in this bizarre dream state as if he was a surgery patient who was still under anesthesia.

Bill was squinting with obsessive curiosity. That isn’t . . . no, it couldn’t be. Danny? Danny Ellensburg? Well, if that were true, I guess it would explain the animals. He loved animals. In fact, didn’t he used to own a bunch of pets? While Bill had been trying in vain to wake himself, the boy and his animal friends had been proceeding closer and closer. But, to Bill’s relief, they didn’t stop near him but in fact walked past him. But Bill’s relief was short lived. Suddenly, the happy little prancing boy made a turn to the side and, inexplicably, the animals followed his lead. Whenever each animal would reach the point where the boy had turned, it would also turn and follow the pattern as if it were being guided by the corner of an invisible wall. Bill’s large, brutish jaw was hanging perpetually open. This was just too much. He would have liked to have gone out there and rung the kid’s neck. I know what would be good for him: kill his animals. All of them, just like I used to do at night. I used to sneak into that enclosure in the back of his house at night. Just to teach him a lesson. I was such a sadistic bastard! It was so much fun, hell I could do it again. I could do it now. Bill began to get hot. I could kill all of those pets of his with my fucking twelve-gage and stuff their carcasses! You hear me Danny?! I’ll kill all of you and there’s nothing you can do to stop me!

But the words didn’t come out of his mouth. His lips moved, but he was mute. It was one of those dreams that people have where they try to speak but can’t. He couldn’t run away if he tried, because the procession had turned another corner, then another, until they formed a living wall that surrounded the now comparatively pathetic looking figure that was standing in the middle of it all.

They stopped.

Danny, like some bizarre miniature ambassador, walked forward. He stopped in front of Bill and just smiled.

“Hello Bill,” he said in a light, youthful voice. “Do you remember me?”

Bill could only stare at Danny’s pale, freckled face in mortified, stone-cold silence.

“I loved my animals, didn’t I Billy?"
“Don’t call me Billy, you little punk.” Bill was briefly surprised that he now had the power of speech.

“I used to talk on and on about them in school to anybody who would listen.”

“Yeah, you couldn’t shut up about them!”

“They were my friends Billy...they were my *only* friends. The other kids didn’t listen to my stories...except for you.”

“I should never have paid attention to your wussy stories in the first place” replied Bill, trying in vain to look intimidating with all of those animal eyes glaring at him.

“I remember what you did; they say animals can’t talk, but I could hear them as clearly as you can hear my own voice. They were in pain Billy. My friends were in pain. Couldn’t you hear them?”

“Shut up.”

“I remember going out to see them in the morning. Nothing my parents could say could stop my crying.”

“Yeah, I bet you liked the time I poured gasoline on that turtle and lit it on fire,” Bill said with a sudden wry grin.

Danny let out a horrifying cry that sounded like it had been amplified a hundred times that seemed to make Bill, along with the entire place around him, quake violently. Bill jumped back, but couldn’t jump back far, because the animals were leaning down with fiery, unforgiving eyes.

“And then, one night, I couldn’t stand it anymore. So I ran off into the woods behind my house. They sent so many people into those woods, but they could never find me. I never returned.”

“T-T-remember. Yes, I remember.”

“And I never will return. The truth is, I died out there Billy. But I didn’t die alone. I made so many, many new friends.”

“Well?” Bill was shaking like a leaf on a tree, but was trying to strengthen his courage. “What are you...what are going to do about it?”

“I am now a child of the night, Billy. And now I am going to haunt your nights just like you haunted mine.”

Then, with a wave of his little angelic hand, Danny gestured to his sylvan army, and they poured forward and blanketed Bill’s poor, writhing form, tearing at him as if they were demons fighting over a newly damned soul.

Eventually, in the midst of his hellish spasmodic contortions and shrieks of terror, Bill awoke with a jolt. He wasn’t passed out in his girlfriend’s apartment, but was in fact in his own bed with no hangover. Alcohol didn’t cause this. Dripping with sweat and panting heavily, he looked out his window into the woods. He reached over and slid the blinds down in one quick movement as if he thought he could block the night out in this way. But as time would tell, there was little Bill could do. Just as he had come at night to cause torment to Danny and everything he held dear, so now Danny would come to haunt the rest of his nights.
They were beautiful.

Demetri Canvarist was beautiful. Long, wavy flowing brown hair on a golden tan, medium athletic build would make anyone a sucker. However, the eyes were what brought me in the most. I wasn’t sure if the colour came from contacts, or if they were naturally that deep purple-blue, but the hazel circles always popped out at me. What I would give to look deeper into those eyes, to run my hand through that ocean of soft curly locks, and to hold that frame closer to me. But I had competition. There wasn’t a soul on campus who didn’t think Demetri was marvelous in some way. The deaf had some work of art to get lost in, but the blind had the honor of hearing golden pipes, everything coming from Demetri’s mouth like a chorus of angels. If you couldn’t hear or see this beauty, you could still be taken away by the soft, cooling touch when you shook hands. Although it was Demetri’s first year on campus, everyone knew who you were talking about when that name escaped your lips.

I came to school to learn more about computer programming. It all made sense, and I wanted to make something of this hobby I had. Things were great. I could take classes, and I still had free time to just hang out. Some nights I’d go out with friends, some nights I’d just stay at home. To be honest, I slept around a bit too, but who doesn’t in college, right? I was trying to find myself, so experimental phases went by with the weeks. Girls, boys, older, younger, all different ethicalities, but who cared. As long as my grades were fine, I knew no one would really care how I spent my time. It doesn’t seem like anyone at family gatherings ask about your sex life, just if you think you’re actually going to pass.

I knew some of the women saw me as a pig, and I couldn’t blame them. Regardless, women did find me attractive. A lot of girls liked hairstyles with shaved sides and an inch or two on the top, and as long as my gut didn’t escape me, I was in good shape. I didn’t go to the gym often, but swimsuits were still my friends. The beard was optional, but I did have better chances if my cheeks weren’t shaved. And, similar to Demetri, quite a few of the girls knew my name.

That was my first two years, just programs and women without any real attachment. I didn’t have plans to make my third year any different, until Demetri walked on the scene.

Our first encounter wasn’t anything special. It was in band class. We were all introducing ourselves near the end of the class, and this clarinet player stood up once the time came. These brown curls came down to the middle of the players back, but it was a distance away from them and the percussion section. I couldn’t really hear anything at all, just the name Demetri. My friend Jasper leaned over to me and whispered, “Some piece of meat she is, huh Malic?” I just nodded a bit, but I wasn’t really paying attention. I looked back at the clarinet player once or twice, but she had her head down the rest of the time.

I honestly thought Demetri was just going to be another quiet freshman. The next class seemed to be more important than socialization, but she did let out little laughs sometimes. I didn’t think I’d get too distracted by her, until she got in my way. It was around the second month, and some school organization decided to throw an autumn ball, as foolish as that sounded. Honestly, it seemed that every group was just looking for a reason to hold a dance. I had my eye on this girl named Lapis Cranston, and I knew she was going to the dance. It was the only reason I could see for wasting my time like that, so I went with Jasper as my wingman. I knew his advice was sad as crap, but it was better than standing alone, creeping on a girl.
After listening to four songs since I arrived, she finally showed up. Her short blue hair was pinned back, and she was wearing a simple, knee length strapless dress. What surprised me was how attracted I was to her muted blue lipstick, since I usually didn’t go after that kind of thing. What else surprised me was who she showed up with. Locked in arms with her fair skinned elbow was Demetri, in something just as stunning. A grey button-up with a cerulean bowtie and a black vest accented her flatter chest well, and black skinny jeans showed off her more noticeable asset, though it didn’t stick out as much as I usually liked. With more of a classic throwback, matching cerulean converse completed the outfit. I was drawn to the sparkling blue eyelids as well, and from what I had seen, her lips were slightly darker than usual. The long flowing brown hair was now up in some kind of gladiator fashion, almost like a war plume. When the two of them waved to people upon entry, I was mesmerized by the shine from all the rings on Demetri’s hands, and the shiny cerulean nail polish on her finger nails. I wanted to stare at Lapis because she was who I came for, and she truly was beautiful, but I couldn’t stop staring at Demetri.

“Well, there she is Malic,” Jasper said to me. “What’s your plan of action?”


“Wait, what? What do you mean them?” He looked in the direction I was staring in. Demetri was hanging up Lapis’ grey cardigan while she talked to some of her friends. “Do you mean that freak? She’s not even dressed right. Why wouldn’t she show off anything she’s got in a dress, not that she’s got much anyway? No bust, no ass...But at least she’s got ‘great personality,’ right?”

By the reaction I got from the people around me, I could have sworn I was just stung by a bee on the nose. “She’s not just a cut of steak for you to check out, Jasper. Who does she have to impress? Who says she has to show anything off?” I broke enraged eye contact and stared at my hands while mumbling “honestly, she looks great.”

“You’re ridiculous, Malic. Do you want me to get her friend out of the picture so you can finally talk to Lapis, or do you want to buy a ticket to stare at the show longer?” Jasper was more interested in cleaning something out from his nails than actually looking at me.

“Jasper, please stop. I’m going to talk to who I want to talk to.”

“Fine, then. I’m going home. I didn’t come here to watch you engage with life unknown. I could be getting some action anyway.” He walked past me emotionlessly and stopped right by the door. He gave one girl a five minute interaction before they were leaving with his arm wrapped around her waist. Suddenly, I was appalled at my best friend. I just wanted to talk to them. Any of them, just to find out more about Demetri. My interest strangled out my libido, and with that, I was moving across the room, over to the crowd.

My feet got heavier the closer I got, and I could feel the room getting hotter. I walked past a group of girls who were giggling noisily. I couldn’t help but overhear one of them say “Isn’t he just the cutest?” One concurred with “I know, and that hair. I just want to swim in it.” I stopped and turned to see where they were looking, but it seemed their eyes were where everyone else’s eyes were at: directly on Demetri.

Then the music changed, and the crowd changed completely. What was just a group of slow dancers on the dance floor was now a group of arm-waving beasts. A screech pierced the clutter conversation, and then Demetri wasn’t by Lapis and friends any more. I felt the breeze after she bolted past me to the hardwood dance floor, but my head didn’t follow. My eyes shut as I inhaled a heavenly scent. Vanilla and roses tickled my nose, and made me smile slightly. I
turned to see Demetri dance, and she wasn’t too hard to find. Where everyone else was in small
groups with their arms close to their sides moving back and forth, Demetri was using all of her
body to the fullest extent. Large suns and rocking waves came across in her array of spins and
leaps, complete trust in every questionable placement of her feet. I was confused, to say the least.
The movements seemed all too feminine for the kind of heartthrob those girls were swooning
over, and yet, their eyes wouldn’t leave Demetri. I gave up trying to figure it out. I was trapped
again by the sight of something glorious.

“He can dance too, isn’t Demetri the best,” clamored the girls.

I couldn’t ignore it anymore. Jasper had just told me she wasn’t dressing right, and now
these girls were saying he was a fantastic dancer and a sculpture come to life. I knew who would
probably clear it up, it would just take some confidence to approach them. But that should have
been easy. Faking confidence was my thing. Or, it had been, before I saw Jasper’s rude display.

“Can I help you?” was all she could say. My reputation probably preceded me to her, and
now Lapis must have thought I was just trying to get into her pants. She wasn’t frowning, but she
wasn’t smiling. I was just happy I was worth eye contact.

“Hi, how are you?” I held out my hand, but she just stared at it and then back at me. I
kept trying. “My name’s Malic...or...everyone calls me that...I’m Malachite Matthews...I was just
wondering...”

“You know, for the sexist pig I thought you were, you aren’t really as smooth as I
thought you would be.” She was fierce, but tame. She struck where it hurt, and didn’t want to
bandage wounds.

“I’m sorry...I mean, I don’t mean...I’m not trying to...I didn’t want you to think...”

“If you want something, just ask. But I can warn you now, I’m not interested in getting to
know your little friend. I have standards, and the fastest way to my heart is through ideas. You
have to pay that ticket to the conductor before you ride any train to my down under.”

I didn’t think I could get myself a higher opinion with her anytime soon, especially since
I almost lost it at her last comment, so I just figured it wouldn’t hurt to just dive right in and ask.

“Well then...What’s up with your friend?”

The question caught her off guard. I knew she was expecting an invitation to accompany
me home. “Who? Demetri? We’re just friends.”

“I’m not wondering about that.” She looked lost. “What’s the deal? Why does he wear
eye shadow and lipstick? Why doesn’t she wear a dress? Where did he learn to dance? Why is
she so chivalrous? Why does he play such a girly instrument like the clarinet? Why isn’t she here
accompanied by a man? Why does he wear his hair so long and glorious like a woman?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Demetri. I’m just talking about Demetri.”

“Well first of all,” she said as she closed her eyes and let out a little laugh, “Demetri isn’t
a girl. So, if that’s what you think, you’re wrong. Demetri isn’t just some girl you can sleep
around with.” She was still bringing this up, but she wasn’t as cold as before I asked about
Demetri. “But at the same time, Demetri isn’t a boy. So, you can’t just hang out with them and
talk about girls. Not only do they have taste, but they also have respect for everyone until they
prove they need otherwise.”

“I don’t understand. If he’s not a boy, and she’s not a girl, then what is Demetri?”
“They are Demetri. Demetri believes that the two genders offered aren’t really fair. Demetri was born into something they didn’t really want. So they chose to live in the middle of gender and be neutral.”

“Are they in transition into a gender?”

“No. Demetri is exactly where Demetri wants to be at. I’ve asked them about that before, and they told me that although some days they do feel more masculine or feminine than others, they don’t feel comfortable binding themselves down to one specific gender.”

“Well they are bound, in one way?” I thought it was so obvious.

“What way is that?” Lapis was smiling, but her eyebrow still raised. She was taking pleasure in educating me about something completely out of left field to me. It must have been some sick pleasure in breaking my closed minded world.

“You’d just have to check Demetri’s nasty parts, right?”

The sting still embraces my face every time I think of my ignorance, and I don’t think I’ve had any more people’s attention at one time than I did when her hand made contact with my cheek. “How dare you. Do you think it’s okay to just check what people have in their pants? I know it’s your favorite step in a friendship since you whore yourself out so often, but some people actually keep that private. If Demetri doesn’t want us to know, then how is it even our f**king business?” Her red face blended well with her blue hair, but it wasn’t something I wanted to see.

Guilt filled me up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. I just…”

“There’s nothing you can do now Matthews. If I didn’t think you were a pig before, all my thoughts have been confirmed now. If you want to get to know Demetri, why don’t you just talk to them? I’m not a messenger, and I don’t want to get involved with you. But I can promise you this, if you try to “find out” Demetri’s gender the way you’ve described, I’m going to make you your definition on genderless, and that transition will probably be worse than anything Demetri’s ever gone through in terms of transitions.” She was gone faster than I could rebuttal anything else, and so were the swarm of girls she was talking to.

I was stunned. I made my way over to a table and sat down. I didn’t talk to anyone, and I probably wouldn’t have even if they sat down next to me. And then my eyes found Demetri. I was fascinated by them. Even in the slow songs, they danced alone with larger arm motions and spinning. Demetri was also the only person I’ve ever seen been able to waltz alone successfully. And with each dance, I felt my interest grow. I liked the way they swayed. I wanted them to sway around me, and I wanted to sway up on them. The firm footsteps on a man as he escorted his date, moving wildly around his body like a windy aura. With each turn and dip, I felt more and more compelled. Finally, my meter hit its mark, and the fumes hit the roof. To this day, I don’t know why I finally got the courage, but I sure as hell regret ever getting up. I may have seemed sure-footed as I walked across the room to them, but I knew I was scared as hell.

Twenty-one yards. Twenty yards. Nineteen yards. I fought every urge to turn back and hide. Who was actually watching my anyway? Jasper was gone, so he wasn’t here to watch me and call me a chicken. Seventeen yards. Sixteen yards. Fifteen yards. I could feel some heads turn as I walked by, but I was still trying to stay strong. Eleven yards. Ten yards. Nine yards. I was almost two rooms away and getting closer. My blood was boiling so much, it was hot enough for tea. Six yards. Five yards. Four yards. Just a room away. Almost close enough to touch. One yard. And Then I froze.

Our eyes met, and they stopped dancing. The awkwardness on their face was like a protester who was just told to try harder after setting a monument on fire. “May I help you?”
they said. That voice distracted me yet again. I was hearing it for what seemed like the first time. Not raspy and deep, but not high and feminine, like a teenage boy whose voice hadn’t dropped yet.

And then I remembered that they were expecting an answer from me. And now I was just standing there like an idiot. After having a history of being turned away so many times, one person just told this Mormon they would take twenty copies of the third testament, and now I was dumbstruck.

“Sir, are you alright?” Their one eyebrow raised, and one corner of their mouth raised up slightly as well.

But words were still not my friends, and at that moment, it seemed like I didn’t know any at all. I heard people around us start whispering. “What a creep. Is he okay? Do you think we should call an ambulance? No, Pearl, put your phone away. Cops would probably show up first, and I took too much acid to fool anyone.”

Finally, I remembered some words. “Hello.” I thought, “You’re doing great, champ. Keep it up.” But I didn’t keep it up. That was the one word I could remember. I could feel myself smiling, but I had no clue why.

The angels strummed at their harps in syncopation. At least that’s what I heard when Demetri laughed. “Don’t I know you?” A pause while I kept smiling like a lunatic. “Yeah, you’re Malachite Matthews. We’re in band together, right.” My smile wouldn’t go away, so I guess they thought I was confirming their accusation. “Yeah, some snooze fest that is, am I right?”

“Y- Yes.” “You did it Malic, you found another word,” said inner me. I could tell I was proud of myself, but I don’t think I was too impressive to the passer by.

“Well, you’ve got it easy. Hard to fall asleep next to all those bass drums, right? Boom, boom, boom, boom.” Demetri’s hitting a pantomimed bass drum, though incredibly childish, was amusing enough for me to snap out of my daze with laughter. A lot of laughter. Maybe too much laughter, but that’s all a matter of opinion...I may have been a bit too loud, but Demetri didn’t seem to mind.

“So did you need something, friend?” Demetri barked up this tree. If only they knew how hard of a question they were actually asking.

“I, um...I like...I think your nails...Your hair’s got...I think your dance moves are great,” I said, finally deciding on one thing instead of trying to say fifteen compliments all at once.

More heavenly syncopation. “Well, thank you Malachite. I’m just doing my own thing, but I’m glad someone enjoys my work.” The music stopped, and then there was a pause. The rest of the room was motionless, just like the two of us, but the rest of them were all laughing. Then, two simple, melancholy chords played over a pedal tone. Demetri’s face light up like the Christmas light winner’s house on Christmas Eve. “Hey, this is Lady Gaga’s song Dope. Do you want to dance?”

I didn’t have time to respond because they were already dancing. The elaborate loops and jumps and spins were back, and I was not prepared. I could even hear them singing along, which was quite a shock. How could they still have enough breath support to sing so evenly while moving around so sporadically? I took a deep breath, and then I squatted down and then bounced back up. I moved to the right, closer to Demetri, and then followed them parallel but back to back as we moved in a line back to the left. They leaped and landed while making a circle with their arms that stretched over their whole body. I was aroused, to say the least. I moved in again, and my arms wrapped around their waist. Demetri did not put up a fight, but was surprised, and
almost missed the beat as I moved on. Almost. I dipped them to the left and to the right, and then twirled them out to the left, and brought them back in with their back resting up to my chest. They weren’t singing anymore, but they began to sway back and forth. I let them out again on a twirl, and from there, they jumped in a full circle around me while still holding my hand.

My insides were scalding hot, even though the song was cooling down. I brought them in again from their bounds away from me, and then we were chest to chest, faces inches apart. I made eye contact, and caught sight of tears. Immediately, I regretted everything. I had hurt them. I hurt their pride of being able to dance alone so successfully. I had hurt their lone wolf personality. I had hurt their core being, where they did not fit into any cookie cutter. I broke them. “I – I – I’m sorry,” I uttered. I released my arms from around them and let them go. We stood there awkwardly once we disconnected, before my strides carried me away. I did not turn around, but I heard nothing from the crowd any more. The song was over and the room was silent.

Although Demetri showed up with Lapis, it’s clear they were their own date the whole time. I should have respected that, and I knew that I should not have approached them, or at least not danced with them. I disrupted them, and that was a crime I would take to the grave. I knew it would have been better to just leave them alone. They were best alone.

I knew that alone, they were beautiful.
The slow, depressed melody, playing of the piano, transitioning into a piercing whistle sequence, exploding into a loud passion filled truth – the buildup of a song all too perfect for the events of not just this night, but Kerry’s life in general… “The Stranger”, a song from Billy Joel. It was as if Billy Joel had some precognition of the scene unfolding at this very moment several times for himself, using it as a muse for his creative juices. Hmm, good for him Kerry thought, at least someone would benefit from what was about to happen, because the two people in this scene, well, neither of them were coming out ahead after this was over.

Kerry was a moderately tall man, thin but not sickly, not gangly but not all that muscular either. He had jet black hair, although recently it looked as if someone sneezed and blew some salt and pepper in it. He had scruffy facial hair, yet on him it played as handsome. The faintest of freckles dotted his checks, and wooly eyebrows kept the northern parts of his eyes warm. Kerry slumped deeper into the weathered leather recliner he was trapped in, clenched his eyes hard and long, took a deep breath, and began the process of drowning the night’s events with a swig of 40-year-old scotch.

Emily, well you see, Emily was special. That’s the only reason Kerry strung this relationship along as far as he did; it’s the only reason he could delay the inevitable for so long. There was nothing wrong with Emily, other than that she had the misfortune of falling in love with such a broken man who unbeknownst to her was incapable of reciprocating the love she felt for him. She stood there in the parlor in front of him, illuminated by the dim light emanating from the fireplace to her left. Even in the poor lighting, her beauty was stunningly obvious. Her designer jeans, hugging her hips and never-ending legs, accentuating every curve, led all the way down to the Gucci heels that cost as much as the average person’s paycheck. She wore an airy sweater up top, with her late mother’s jewelry draping her neck, and dotting her ears. Her facial features were perfectly proportioned, and her electric green eyes captivating. Her perfectly blonde hair, with the subtlest curls, bounced around as she dug into Kerry’s soul with her words. Layer the outer beauty on top of the rarest of warm hearts, golden values, brilliant intelligence, and undying faith; well, even straight women found themselves infatuated with Emily. Yes, she was special. It’s the only way Kerry could keep his demons concealed and at bay for as long as he did. He wanted to give her the love she deserved; he fooled himself into thinking he could at times. Even in this moment, as she stood in front of him in a combative stance, eyes bulging, throwing her finger in his face, cutting him with her words, hair flying with every sharp convulsion of her rage filled body… even in this moment, she was flawless. After all, she had every reason to be angry. She had stood by Kerry for two years, and believed the character Kerry pretended to be, the character that pretended to be capable of love, decisiveness, and commitment. It was only reasonable for her to expect a commitment to the next stage of the relationship; there was no way she could see that Kerry would end things at the very moment she would even insinuate such an expectation.

“I don’t even know who the hell you are right now,” Emily sniped, “this entire time, never a single indication that I wasn’t good enough for you. Never a shred of doubt telegraphed.”

Kerry sat there, took another sip. He knew she wasn’t done. It would only be rude to interrupt her. He was a broken excuse of a man, an asshole maybe, but he was not impolite.
Emily continued the barrage, impressively without noticeably stopping for a breath, “And the way, the way that you can just end it! You end it like we’re juvenile lovers…”

Kerry thought to himself, I am quite juvenile.

On Emily went, “Not even a discussion?! Not even an attempt to further delay the conversation like a normal man with commitment issues might?! You can just throw away two years of your life, no, MY life, just because you aren’t interested in marriage, not even the thought of it?”

It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested, he just knew that it wasn’t practical, that it would be destined for doom. He had to fight everyday just to this point in order to keep his demons at bay. Two years had been hard enough, but a lifetime wasn’t realistic. Kerry sat there, sipping on his whiskey, looking up at her, wondering how long she could continue without taking a breath. Her electric green eyes, turned red with the fire of the hate burning in her soul, doing their best to tear through Kerry’s hardened exterior, searching for where his soul should be, trying to find a shred of humanity that Kerry truly didn’t have.

“What do you even want,” Emily’s tongue sliced at Kerry as she slapped the squat whiskey glass from his hands.

Kerry took this as his introduction into this heavily one-sided ‘conversation.’ “You see, that’s just it. I don’t know what I want,” Kerry stated very matter of fact, “BUT I do know, that I don’t want you.” This was of course a lie, everyone wanted Emily. Kerry wanted Emily, but he knew there was no long-term future he could provide. He was damaged goods. In a way though, he didn’t want Emily, because he didn’t want to make her suffer any longer, suffer through the dream of a happy ending that Kerry wasn’t capable of delivering. “Actually, I haven’t wanted you for a long time, but I wasn’t about to hurt your feelings. You see, unlike so many before you, I really kind of liked you, I just didn’t love you. Don’t take it personally, I’m incapable of love. I had hoped you would be the one to do this, that you’d get sick of me at a much earlier date and make this whole break-up event a lot easier on both of us. I find that in these situations, it’s usually a lot easier on everyone involved if the girl is the one to do the breaking up part.”

Emily, appearing as if Kerry’s words were a bullet fired from his mouth, clenched her eyes, gasped, and seemed to stumble back ever so slightly. “I don’t even know who the hell you are, you’re a stranger to me,” Emily lashed out at him.

As if Billy Joel himself had embodied Kerry, looking straight into Emily’s eyes he deadpanned, “Well, we all have a face that we hide away forever, a face we only take out and show ourselves when everyone has gone, it’s the face of a stranger,” Kerry took a deep breath and looked away, “Baby, you just stayed around too long.”

And with that it was over. Emily fled the scene of the crime, leaving Kerry to wallow in his own worthlessness. He was accustomed to this. It was a broken record, playing that song, you know the one, over and over and over. Kerry clipped the end of a cigar, held it between his lips, never lighting it… smoking a cigar was for joyous occasions, and this was not one of those… yet, he wanted to taste it, and imagine that someday maybe he would have a joyous occasion born of love that he could light a cigar for, but he knew he couldn’t, he knew he wouldn’t, he knew that possibility was stolen from him long before Emily entered his life.

That night would have implications that Kerry had long imagined, but had been able to avoid to that point. Something inside the broken mess holding him together gave way that night; the solitary lynch pin that kept him driving forward through the mind-numbing fog known as life, no longer could support the weight of his despair. Kerry sat in that chair all night, rendered catatonic, moving not a muscle, the cigar turned a soggy mess of tobacco between his lips. You
see, Emily was special in that she was the only light in his life that shined so bright, that when forced out of his life, was the emptiness and darkness of his soul so present and suffocating. Out of that darkness, Kerry’s demon presented itself. Unsurprisingly to Kerry, it was an all too familiar figure, a face he had known all his life. He sat there, in a stare down with this demon, for hours on end, until the next evening. It was time for Kerry to put an end to this haunting, he wouldn’t allow this demon to hold power over him any longer or to hurt anyone else in the process.

After the previous night’s events, Emily had gone to Wednesday church service to begin the process of healing the damage to her heart that Kerry had caused. It was a good service, but she had a hard time taking in the words, finding herself distracted with the previous night’s events on a looping replay in her mind. She made it through the service, put on a fake smile as she passed through the cluster of other members happy to see her, and left the parking lot on her way home to her lonely apartment. As she pulled past the cemetery on Old Country Road, through the streaks of rain running down her windshield, she saw a familiar figure standing alone. She was gripped with pain, fear, and curiosity, and limped her car over to the curb to observe. Standing alone in the cemetery, through the wrought iron entry way with the broken sign, hanging cockeyed a bit to the left was a familiar face; it was Kerry. She watched him, standing among the over-grown weeds, the ones that had grown out of control as the groundskeeper, an old man who despite his best efforts, had grown too tired to keep up with the work. She had to squint to get a good bead on him, the sun-setting at his rear in its blaze orange glory, was blinding. He stood there on this chilly fall night, rain pounding his slinky figure, in nothing more than the ensemble he had worn the night before. She watched him for what felt like eternity, captivated by the sight at hand. Emily watched as he stood there, shoulders slumped forward, head down, chin dug into his chest; his rain soaked t-shirt hanging heavily from his torso, water streaming from his water logged black hair. Without picking his head up, he brought a bottle of whiskey to his nose, inhaled the aroma of that smooth aged spirit deep into his lungs, then flicked his wrist over and poured it out on the ground in front of him. When the last drop fell from the lip of the bottle, she watched as he reached deep into his pocket, pulled something out, inserted it into the bottle, and dropped the glass vessel to the earth. A semi pulled around the corner, high-beams on to help cut through the heavy precipitation, and by the time Emily’s eyes had recovered from the blindness, he was gone. She sat there for the next hour, gnawing nervously at her fingernails, wondering what to do next.

Emily had to know what he was doing there. In their entire time together, Kerry had never mentioned any impactful deaths in his life. What was he doing there in the cemetery in some trance like state? She threw on her white soft-shell rain jacket, pulled the hood over her head, exited her car, and scampered across the street. As she moved up the pathway, her gait slowed, and with each step as she drew in closer to the scene that played out in front of her, her ankles grew weak and wobbled on the tiny heel points. As she got near, she was overcome with a sense of dread. She saw the bottle, knelt and picked it up. Too anxious to go right in for the note, she wondered whose resting spot she was disturbing. She brushed away the weeds from the unkempt headstone, and wiped away the accumulated rain drops from the granite slab. The realization was dizzying, and brought her down to both knees, ass on heels. The marker read, “Mary Benson, 1950 – 1995.” Emily’s head was spinning; Mary Benson was the name of Kerry’s mother. But she wasn’t dead, was she? Emily stayed kneeling in that spot, knees sinking into the sopp y ground beneath, playing the last two years of her relationship through her head. She had never met Mary; Kerry always said she was tied up or unavailable, generally
changing the subject as quickly as the topic of his family had come up. Whenever she would ask about his mom, his normal evasive personality would go into hyper drive. Now it was clear why, his mother was dead, and he didn’t want to talk about it. What wasn’t clear, was why he would hide such a non-trivial fact. It was with that simple question whispered out loud to herself, that the terror took over. She slowly moved her gaze down to the bottle, hands trembling, and removed the folded piece of loose-leaf paper from the container.

Emily read the letter. It was long; the content weighty. The neatly placed words sharp and cutting, alternating between anger and sadness, all dripped in sorrow. She now understood that Kerry wasn’t incapable of love because he was some sort of narcissistic asshole. She now understood that Kerry didn’t break it off because he was selfish, he was releasing her to find happiness that he couldn’t provide her. She now understood that the reason Mary wasn’t discussed was because of the atrocities Mary had committed against her son, that rendered him incapable of knowing or maintaining love at any point in his life. By the time she had finished, her eyes tired from squinting to soak in every word with the light from the setting sun now gone, the paper was sopping wet, but not from rain. No, the rain had stopped. The moisture was streaming from her eyes. In a fit of panic, Emily blocked out the presence of her still running car across the street and leapt to her feet, reaching down and taking her heels in hand, propelled herself into the loneliest, scariest, most desperate mile long sprint of her life to Kerry’s house.

She hit the front porch, and in one swift motion threw the door open and spun around to her left, peering into the parlor.

“Kerry,” she screamed.

Kerry sat there in his chair, gun pressed to his temple.

“Don’t, please don’t,” she pleaded

Kerry, with a single tear streaming down his check said, “I’m sorry.”

And with that, the hammer dropped. The muzzle flash seemingly blinding. Emily’s scream was piercing, yet no audible sound was made. She stood there, fifteen feet from the lifeless carcass of the man she loved. The one, who she finally understood. The one who she now knew wasn’t a hardened, asshole of a being, but was a beaten down, traumatized and scared boy trapped in a man’s body; one who was crippled and imprisoned by his past. He sat there, in the same clothes from an hour earlier, drenched so badly they were still dripping upon the floor. In his right hand, a printed image Emily immediately recognized from the entryway; it was a picture from their first date. From the table next to him, streaks of smoke danced in the air in front of his face. They were from his cigar, a smoldering Cuban.

Emily, unable to bear the weight of what she had witnessed, crumpled to her fours. She tried to move, but couldn’t. She gasped for air, but there seemingly wasn’t any. She tried to cry, but the shock had set her catatonic. After a moment, she collapsed down to her side, arms and knees pulled into her chest. She lay there, staring deep into his eyes, remembering the man she knew and loved, thinking of the future she wished they could have had.
Nadalia pulled herself away from her Animaniacs morning routine and walked over to her mother’s side who was accepting a package from a delivery man. Her mother was talking kindly with the man and signing of the sheet while “I’m Nobody's Mama” played from the T.V.  

“What is it, Mom?”  

“Well, I don't know, you'll have to open it and find out, won't you?” Beatrice handed the package to Nadalia, and began to tear the brown wrapping off the box and then popped the top of the box open to see inside. She pulled some cloth out, and as she pulled, a long, frilly, white dress unfolded down to the ground in front of her.  

“Thanks Mom! It's so pretty!” Nadalia leaned into her mom and hugged her thighs while holding the dress. “No problem dear, I'm glad you like it--” she said through some laughs “- happy birthday. Why don't you go throw it on and we can go for a walk, I have some place special for you today.”  

“Oh, where are we going?”  

“You'll see.”  

Nadalia went to her room and put her dress on. It had two straps over her shoulders and left her arms free. The dress went down to her ankles and had frilly textures at the bottom. It was nicer than anything Nadalia had ever worn before. She left her room to find her mother around the corner in the kitchen in her blue jeans and denim shirt-jacket. Her sturdy, hourglass figure showing through her clothing in more confidence and tenacity than anything. Nadalia walked up to her side to peek on what her mother was doing. “Whatcha doin’?”  

“Just signing off on some bills before we head out.”  

“What's a bill?”  

“They're like things that we use but aren't mandatory to pay for right away. So like, the water we use we have to pay for, but we don't have to put a quarter in our sink every time we use it.”  

“Oh ok. What's another word for man-da-tory?”  

“Umm, it's something you have to do. Like it's mandatory I...tickles you on your birthday!” Nadalia jumped and giggled as her mom whipped around to tickle her ribs. “Now come on,” her mom began. “We should get going before it's too late”.  

Nadalia and her mother had left their apartment building and began walking towards the bus stop. Nadalia had been given the day off of school by her mother and was smiling to everyone they crossed on the street; an old lady with fluffy black hair, a man delivering mail, even the dirty man that sits on the ground that usually scares Nadalia. There was another man that was walking towards them going the opposite way. She smiled at him too, but as he passed he looked up and down at them and whistled. Beatrice turned toward him as he passed, “Fuck you!”  

“Hey fuck you whore!”  

“Yea, fuck you, you piece of shit!” she spat back. Nadalia was hanging onto her mom’s thigh as they walked uncomfortable with her mother’s exchange with the man. Beatrice brushed her daughter’s hair, “Sorry baby, are you ok?”  

Nadalia nodded without knowing a verbal answer that would suffice. After walking a couple feet, and after Nadalia’s shaking had stopped, she looked up at her mother, “Why were you guys yelling at each other?”
“Because he whistled at us.”
“Is whistling bad?”
“The way he did was. The way he whistled at us wasn’t nice.” They walked a couple more feet in silence and Nadalia prodded another question, “What’s another word for fuck?” Beatrice looked down and chuckled; “depends on how you're using it. 'Fuck you' is kind of like telling someone to leave you alone, like if someone is being mean to you.”

After some walking and waiting, they had found themselves riding a bus. Nadalia nodded off for most of the ride, but when she awoke she was wide awake with excitement. She had not seen this part of the city before and boy was it exciting. All sorts of cars were driving around, crowds of people flowed between lights, and all the buildings looked like stores and restaurants. Holding her mother’s hand they stepped off the bus and Nadalia gazed around with her mouth open. She unknowingly was squeezing her mother’s hand more than usual due to the crowds, which she did not notice until she felt her palms sweaty. Her mom led her to a restaurant called Florence, a pizzeria. It was so pretty inside! The tables were a clean black glass and the menus were white. The seat was a dark green and a soft leather. Over each table hovered the glow from a hanging light. Her mother looked at her across the table.” Get whatever you want, it's your other present.” Between the two of them half a pizza, mozzarella sticks, and several sodas had vanished. A lava cake with sparklers were being shared between them but with little progress after the main course. Nadalia was amazed at all this food and how good it tasted. “How come we don't come here more often?”

Beatrice tilted her head both ways in a tired way as she explained, “We just can't afford to. Are you feeling full, dear?” Nadalia nodded as she leaned back and pushed out her belly. Both giggled as the server brought the bill and laid it down on the table. Beatrice opened up the embroidered leather and made a somewhat frowned face. She leaned to one side and pulled out a rolled up wad of cash, “you ready dear?” Nadalia nodded and Beatrice laid the money on the table. She walked over to Nadalia and carried her out the door and onto the bus that was outside. Nadalia sat by her mother in the back and looked out the window at the restaurant. She thought it looked so pretty around here. The bus slowly started to move forward, and the server they had was now outside chasing the bus. Nadalia looked at her mother; “I think they missed the bus. Should we tell the bus driver?”

“No dear, there will be other buses for them, it'll be ok.” Beatrice pulled Nadalia into a hug and laid her daughter’s head on her lap. Nadalia napped on and off but was energized from her nap earlier. “Think we can ever live next to that restaurant?”

“Hm? Oh, well, maybe one day. It's a little out of our pay range right now,” Beatrice calmly stated as she brushed Nadalia’s hair. Nadalia was looking out at the window now as they pulled up to their neighborhood. The iron crossed fencing, brick buildings, and near empty streets felt comfortably familiar. They got off the bus and started walking back to their home. The streets were busier now with school kids running about and playing in the road. “Whuuufuuu!” Nadalia looked up to find a big man looking directly at her as he whistled. She leaned into her mother’s leg and looked up at her. She was met with her mother making gestures with her hands and head as if telling her to go for it. “Fu-fu-fu-fuck you,” Nadalia squeeked as she slightly turned her head back. She looked back and saw that by the time she had said anything, the man was well out of ear shot. She looked up at her mom not entirely sure why her eyes were begging to water. “Oh baby,” Beatrice got down on one knee and pulled Nadalia into a full hug. She pulled her daughter back and held one hand onto her face while slightly chuckling. “Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it.”
“Mom?”
“Yes?”
“What's another word for whore?”
Robert Adams
“Call Center”

Jim lunged from his pod, headset stretched to snap.
“Ma’am, you cannot talk to me that way,” he demanded. She must not have listened, since he continued in a rising voice, “I am a professional. You are being disrespectful, and I don’t have to take this!”
His bulging biceps flexed under his tight polo shirt. He seemed to be going into body-builder double-deltoid pose.
“I am discontinuing this call. You can try again when you have a more appropriate attitude!”
He jabbed the End Call button with a meaty finger, ripped the headset off his close-cropped skull, and hurled it to the desk with disgust.
“I’m going to lunch,” he stated unequivocally.
I happened to actually be scheduled for lunch then, and I followed him at a safe distance as he muttered down the hallway, grey carpet muffling the stomp of his shoes. I wondered what the disabled old lady could have said to piss him off so, at our social service call center. He had mentioned being pretty fed up here, and was hoping as a veteran he could get a job on the border patrol instead.
In the lunch room Jim sat at the empty faux-wood table, folded his hands and dropped his head. After an intense whispered prayer, he grabbed a brown paper bag from the cubby next to him. With one hand he pulled out a ziplocked sandwich, and with the other he tossed an issue of Guns and Ammo on the table. He chomped vigorously as he read.
Nonfiction
Amy Anderson
“I am a Bassist”

It’s the first day of college classes, and I’m sitting next to three people that I know from high school. This, plus the fact that I’m not very good at writing, has made me apprehensive about this course. Our professor has just informed us that we will be writing a narrative about a discourse community that we are a part of. Immediately I think about orchestra. As she continues to talk about the syllabus and what we will be doing for the semester, I think about what my narrative will say. I find myself going back in time to when I first joined orchestra.

I imagine I’m sitting in the orchestra room. It’s the beginning of summer, and the AC is blasting. I look around and can’t help feeling out of place. Everyone else in the room is younger than me. However, it is comforting to know that we are all here for the same reason; to learn an instrument. Summer school orchestra is a resource for middle school students who want to learn a new instrument or get ahead with the one they already play. I am not a middle schooler, however. I decided to play the bass as a senior and I needed to take summer school orchestra in order to catch up. My little sister has offered to help me learn how to play the same instrument as her and with her help I quickly pass the students in the beginner level course. I move into the advanced level, which is a bit of a challenge, but I can do it. By the end of summer school I feel like I can call myself a bassist.

Once the school year starts and I get to my first orchestra class I am asked, “So what made you want to start playing the bass?” This was a question that I had heard many times, but this time it was the orchestra director, Mrs. Leibfried, who was asking me. I was nervous about being put on the spot in front of the whole class, but luckily this was a question I was prepared for.

“Well, I have always wanted to play an instrument. I have tried playing piano and flute, but I didn’t really feel like they were the best options for me. I watched my sister play the bass and I thought that it was a really cool instrument. I wanted to challenge myself to be able to do what she does. So, here I am.” This answer seemed to please the teacher, and she moved on to asking the other new students about what brought them to her class.

Throughout the course of that year I learned a ton about the bass and being in an orchestra. For the first time I actually felt like I was a part of a community. Playing in an orchestra requires you to know a lot of different information that is very specific to music. Someone who is not a part of orchestra would not understand a conversation they overheard between two violinists about needing their bridge repositioned or how they were struggling to do the correct bowings because of difficult slurs. Only people who learned this vocabulary from being a part of our community would understand.

Coming into orchestra without ever playing a string instrument before meant that I had a lot to learn. Not only did I have to learn about the parts of the instruments, but I also had to learn vocabulary that has to do with how you play the music. For example, if you are supposed to play something loudly, the piece will tell you to play it forte which is represented by the letter f. Alternatively, if you are supposed to play something quietly, the piece will tell you to play piano or p. In addition to these, there are tons of words that indicate any other way that a composer would like you to stylize your playing. Learning music is like learning a new language. Not only do you have to learn the previously mentioned vocabulary, but you also have to learn how to read the notes. Music is presented by notes on a staff. The notes range from A to G, but they are listed on the staff in different orders depending on the clef. All of this complex information...
seems like it would be very difficult to understand, but learning it through being a part of the orchestra made it really easy to get used to. For my senior project I decided to arrange a piece of music. The senior project is a project of your choice that you are required to pass in order for you to graduate. For mine, I took the song “Oh, Ms. Believer” by Twenty One Pilots, and I turned it into something that the whole orchestra could play. Having this opportunity to rewrite music definitely made me a better musician. It helped me see music from the viewpoint of the other instruments in the orchestra, and it made me feel like I was deeply connected to the music community.

Playing the bass and being a part of the high school orchestra is something that I loved. I finally had a title for myself; I was a bassist. After I graduated I knew that I wanted to keep playing, so I enrolled in the college orchestra. When the day came for us to have our first college rehearsal, I was a nervous wreck. I was sweating from having to find someone to help me pick out an instrument, and I was worried about meeting the other people in the orchestra. I ended up coming in late because I was getting my instrument and being late meant that I didn’t get a chance to tune the bass that had been sitting in a closet all summer. My instrument was so out of tune that I couldn’t fix it myself, and I was too scared to ask for help. When it came time to sight read the music that our orchestra director had picked out, I couldn’t play it at all. This was partly because my bass was so out of tune and partly because the music was too hard for me to play. There were even parts of the music that were written in a clef that I hadn’t had to learn yet. Not knowing how to read my own music made me feel like I was standing on the outside of the community. I told myself things like “how dare I call myself a bassist if I can’t even tune my own instrument or read my own music?” However, I shut these thoughts down and reminded myself that I worked hard to earn the title of bassist. Deciding that the next rehearsal would be better, I went home to practice. By the time the next rehearsal came around I still felt unprepared. All of the pieces we were assigned were still way too hard for me to play. I did better than last time, but I still struggled to keep up with everyone else. This was again discouraging and it made me consider dropping out of orchestra all together. I ended up talking to the orchestra director about it and she told me that I should stay in the class but only play the easier pieces. I took her advice and stayed in a bit longer. However, even the easy pieces were way too hard, and I began to dread having rehearsal rather than looking forward to them like I did in high school. Orchestra wasn’t fun anymore.

I eventually decided that I was better off not continuing orchestra and I dropped out. I left the music building feeling good about my decision, but after having time to reflect I realized that I was going to miss it a lot. I am no longer a part of that wonderful music community. Can I still call myself a bassist? What am I? Where do I go from here?

Now I’m sitting in my room questioning my decision to quit orchestra. I wonder what I will write my narrative about now that I am no longer a part of the orchestra community. I pause and think. No. That’s not right. I am a part of that community, and I will be a part of that community as long as I can read music, as long as I can play the bass, and as long as I love to make music. Music will always be a part of me. I will continue to play the bass. I will play it when I’m lost, but I don’t know what to call myself. I will always hold on to the knowledge that I gained while being a part of the orchestra community, and I will continue to expand that knowledge as I continue to play the bass. I know who I am; I am a bassist.
Gavin Johnson
“To the Overlook of Eagle Mountain”

On the morning of July 14, 2012, I got my car fully packed with my duffle bag, camping tent, chairs, cooler, and a box of other camping accessories. Over a month of our summer, after graduating high school, passed by and I just knew a night of camping and hiking the next day would be a chance for my best friend Jake and me to bond one last time before I headed off to college. I invited him along to go see the top of Eagle Mountain, 138 miles east from our hometown of Mountain Iron, Minnesota.

Jake and I have always been close. He used to live only two blocks away from me. He may have always been a leader to me in all of our eccentric adventures together, but a day of hiking was my very own idea for us to do together before going our separate ways.

The one fact that stuck in my mind was this: Eagle Mountain is the highest peak in the state of Minnesota. Its elevation stands at 2,301 feet with a 7-mile-round-trip hiking trail on the side. Jake and I knew that we were more than physically fit for a long, rocky walk. After just graduating high school, I wanted to feel the sensation of being on top of things, like getting a head start in adulthood and more responsibility. I wanted to get farther upscale in elevation to be on top of an entire place that I have always been happy to call “home.” I predicted Eagle Mountain being high enough to meet my own satisfaction—just as long as it wasn’t going to rain.

I drove my first car at the time of the trip, a 2001 Chevrolet Malibu. It was one of my last trips to make with that car. To this day, I’ve missed how well-equipped that car was to strap my canoe onto. I could’ve brought my canoe on the trip, knowing Eagle Mountain is part of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, but I didn’t want to make the trip more complicated with excess equipment. We were more focused on hiking. Jake and I took that little silver car of mine through the backwoods highway passing Makinen. The drive was surrounded by scattered spruce trees and tall-grassed hills. After the first hour of driving, we were along the North Shore with a stretching view of Lake Superior. The large body of water played “peek-a-boo” with us, showing various parts at different times through the shoreline’s trees. It led us up, northeastern bound, on Highway 61, starting from Silver Bay to Cascade River State Park, another hour of driving.

We arrived at the reserved campsite that I arranged for one night. It was around 3 P.M. when we got the tent up. The ground was nicely flat, not too rocky. It was only rocky enough to allow my foot to slide against the pebbles as I kicked up the dust. We couldn’t complain. All Jake wanted to do was nap while the clouds were getting gray. Sunshine peeked through some of the trees and spotlighted a few of the other campsites. I went into my bag for my digital camera to take one shot of our campsite fully organized and unpacked.

I knew I found my way as an artist with a camera. Jake wasn’t much of a photographer, but I do fine with it at the right angles and bright lights. If I ever want to draw myself in something scenic or to remember something at its best detail, I take pictures. While he was still napping, I kept myself entertained by trying to build a house of cards and take pictures of them staying still and upright.

Later, a chipmunk came nearby across the dirt-grounded driveway. It looked at me and at the tent like it knew exactly why I was there. It ran to the small fire pit at the opposite corner of the tent and jumped on top of the firewood bundle. I assumed the chipmunk was determined to stay on top, wherever it goes. Suddenly, I saw another chipmunk sneaking behind me while it was pointing towards a small pile of broken twigs. I took a picture of the second chipmunk without the flash because I didn’t want to startle it. If I did, its fur might’ve turned white and
rolled up into a ball, petrified. I just wanted to thank the little creature for the image and stopping by. The first chipmunk disappeared before I could thank it the same.

Around 7 P.M. there wasn’t enough firewood for Jake and me to get the flames going by sunset. Apparently, it wasn’t enough for that climbing chipmunk either. Jake and I went down a hill alpine from the campsite when he spotted some broken branches of spruce to cut up and burn. Unknowingly at the time, the Cascade River was once formed by lava flows over bedrock 1.1 billion years ago. Our campsite may have been on the edge of the Earth’s crust at some point. The surface of the Cascade River’s volcanic canyon took on a huge disguise over the years with grounds of fern, fir, spruce, birch and cedar trees. That geographic fact would’ve been something for Jake and me to ponder in deep thought over the campfire. However, we just cooked a couple of hot dogs and played several games of rummy until the fire got dimmer into a rather peaceful night.

Jake and I woke up early; it must’ve been around seven. I would hate to think that we were rushing the morning through to get the trip over with after discussing a few of his family problems he told me over the fire. I promised him that hiking might help clear his head, especially when we get to see more of the North Shore and the rivers connected to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Jake had his doubts about my plans for this short trip because I didn’t pack our fishing gear or my canoe. I just wanted this trip to be simple, without distractions- no cell phone coverage, for instance. We had our bowls of cereal and got hydrated enough to pack up everything at the site. We left the camp and made our way through the unpaved road. As the hill up ahead started looking more inclined, the trees got thicker, mixing with fir and birch.

After driving northbound into the deeper woods for 15 minutes, we parked in front of the entry point of the Eagle Mountain trail. The sky was at its brightest and clearest, even though the entry was all shadowed. Jake and I both had our hiking boots and two backpacks. The one I carried was for snacks and PowerAde, and the other he carried was our shoes to change back into if our feet got too hot.

After the first mile, we stopped to take pictures of each other posing on the trail. We were in this drop-off bowl of the trail centered by its surroundings of tall grass and ferns. The trees of aspen and pine seemed to circle around the rim of this bowl. I posed with a determined thinker’s look, dressed in my jean jacket and pants. Jake posed on part of the trail going uphill with his thumbs up in his camouflage jacket. When we passed by a split boulder, I posed with my right arm going in between the boulder because I was impersonating the movie “127 Hours” (A film that I gave high praise to its portrayal of the true story about a guy surviving from a canyon accident which entrapped him for five days). I had no worries of being stuck in one spot for five days straight when I ran my hand between the boulder’s smooth, clean split to its core. Later, without me knowing it, Jake took another picture of me in which I was walking down the trail, looking so natural with the bright sunshine glowing up the green field.

We then reached the Boundary Waters area line. It had two pieces of plywood making a long narrow bridge over a swamp. The shallow waters had a surface of mossy rocks, tall grass, and bushes. My nostrils have never opened so widely before, the sunshine activated the swamp’s sudden pollen. It felt like we were standing on this one lonely lake nearby, having its one outlook being the only visible portage for anyone passing through with a canoe. I really wished we would’ve brought my canoe, now knowing the opportunity. It was a small lake, so it would be hard to tell how deep it really was. Dark clouds flew overhead along with a bald eagle as I took one picture of the lake. The eagle must’ve made some extra wind with its powerful wings flapping and gliding overhead as we kept walking below its way against the wind.
The last mile towards the summit got steep with some unfair footsteps on the way up. The rocks and patches of moss formed into the most awkward set of stairs that could ever be made. The roots exposed in and out of the ground and were the closest thing we had for support handles. I pulled myself up with one hand gripping a fresh, sprouted branch and the other on a patch of grass tickling between my fingers. We took a break on this one spot of a balcony-formed cliff to sit on the edge, drink our PowerAdes and pack up our jackets into one of our backpacks. Our view wasn’t fulfilling just yet what with many pine trees blocking our way of seeing Lake Superior. So, we continued looking up, sweating and climbing as if heaven never expected us to be late for anything so glorifying.

The summit had a lot of sunshine and little wind, despite being at higher elevation. Jake and I were really hoping for more wind for how hot we got from the climb. We didn’t complain further after witnessing a top view. The summit had a stone platform leaning more at a wider angle towards Lake Superior, and its opposite side had to be the easternmost part of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. After taking some pictures and looking beyond the lake’s horizon, my canoe regret was forgotten. The lake painted a medium shade of blue along the shoreline comparing with the sun’s reflection from the beyond at a lighter blue, endlessly to be seen through our sunglasses. Today, I look at these pictures of Jake and me together at the summit and its landmark plate portraying it as Minnesota’s highest peak. Snapshots of adulthood goals were reached to the top. Trees will never have to block our views, but they can still be seen through or overhead. Jake and I may have grown up to discover that there will always be a cool breeze and sunshine at the end, as it was earned for our friendship.

Works Cited:

In December of 1851, Sojourner Truth, a women’s rights activist and African American abolitionist, delivered her 354 word speech, “Ain’t I a Woman”. Although the speech did not move people in length, it moved people in thought about her ideas of women’s rights. In the speech, Truth explains how women can have all the characteristics white men claimed women and African Americans did not have, such as strength, intellect, and faith. She then continues with saying how these things are just excuses to belittle these groups. Some ways she brings these out are using rhetorical questions to raise attention and cause conversations about the topics brought out in her speech. Truth relates her arguments back to the three core elements a person was thought to be based on at that time: body, mind, and soul. All of these things related to the level of importance a person may have at that time, whether black, white, male or female. The body allows someone to work, and do their part in society. The mind raises a person’s status and is seen as more worthy of respect. The soul and religion were seen as very important towards being a good person.

After Truth’s opening, the first section of her speech discusses how white men see women as fragile beings that need to be helped, while the men put the work in. Truth states: “That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.”

She then explains how she does not receive this treatment as a slave, nor does she need it. Slaves were not seen as people at this point in time, and were expected to do their work, no matter male or female. Women were doing the same amount and level of work as men, but were not seen as equal for doing so. Truth says: “Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?”

The immense amount of work expected from a slave did not differ whether the person was male or female. Female slaves were also able to complete the level and quality of work as a man, but when this argument was put towards white people, women were not thought to be able to do so. Truth states: “I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it – and bear the lash as well!”

Body or strength was seen as important for a man, or person, to have during this time. Strength meant that you could work for your family and support yourself. Women, being smaller or maybe weaker, were thought to not be able to push like a man, lift like a man, or work like a man. Truth proves her and other women’s abilities by showing the work that she does, while also being punished and not being treated as equally as white men.

Towards the end of her first point, Truth brings out the rhetorical question, ain’t I a woman. Truth continues: “And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”

What makes this point so strong is the fact that she does not actually want it to be rhetorical. Her meaning behind it begs the question: why isn’t she being treated the same as a white woman? Biologically she is a woman, but is not seen as so because of the color of her skin. She had thirteen children, and like any other mother she did everything she could to care for them and protect them. Truth tried to relate to the pain of any woman who had lost a child by sharing how many of her children were taken and sold to slavery. The repetition of her question, ain’t I a woman, along with sharing her own struggles as a black woman and a mother, drives home her point of her not being treated as an equal. This point also brings out the fact that she is able to do the same amount of work as a man. The amount of ploughing, and planting, and gathering that she was expected to do was not lowered because she is a woman. This causes others to see that even though they are women, they are able to do anything. It erases the excuse of body being a factor when talking about civil rights.
Truth begins her second point by bringing up the argument about mind. Truth states:

“Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of the audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights?”

Truth argues that intelligence does not and should not be a measure of how many rights a person should have. This has to do with not only women’s rights, but African American rights. What makes this even more of an issue is that many women and African Americans did not receive the level of education, if any education, that a white man could receive. White women often went to grade school to learn to read or write, but rarely continued their education after that because of their need to be at home. Free African American people in the north were able to receive an education, but again it was not at the level of a white school, and level of education was even more limited if they were a woman. Slaves in the south rarely ever got an education, and were seen as lucky if they were able to even read or write.

Truth then brings up another rhetorical question. Truth asks:

“If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean to not let me have my little half measure full?”

This question is asked to draw attention to the inabilities of women and African Americans to receive a proper education. Their education standards only measure up to half the level of a white man. This makes it unfair for white man to state they are uneducated and cannot have the same rights as a white man if they are not offered the same opportunities as a white man. This disproves the ability to base women’s civil rights on intelligence.

Truth then talks about her third point, the soul. Truth states:

“Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.”

Truth references a reverend and the church in her third point. She talks about how even the church does not give women support in their fight for civil rights. Many even stated they were less of a person for being a woman. Men often thought of themselves closer to God, because Jesus himself was a man.

This again brings up another set of repeated rhetorical questions. By Truth asking, “where did your Christ come from,” she did not mean to insinuate that she, herself, does not believe in Christ. Truth was trying to point out that men had created a different Christ in their eyes that brings them closer to him because they are also men. She then showed how man could have never been able to connect themselves to God by the creation of Jesus without a woman. Bringing up this point proved that women have been, and still are needed in the church, and faith cannot be a distinguishing factor when trying to belittle women’s rights.

Truth then concludes her speech with a call upon all women, black and white, to work together to fight for women’s rights. Truth says:

“If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.”

Truth then brings attention back to women working together to accomplish this goal. By working together, there is not much that the women and black community couldn’t do to obtain their rights.

In “Ain’t I A Woman” Sojourner Truth takes all of these excuses men had been stating for years and years to put down women, and flips them to show that they were completely wrong. There was nothing that women or African Americans could not do or are not capable of that white men had been doing and got civil rights for. Relating these arguments back to body, mind, and soul connected the morals that people had at this time, and really brought to light ideas that no other person had really shed light on up to that point. “Ain’t I A Woman” was a huge turning point in the fight for civil rights, and now readers can look back and see these reasons why today.
In *Catcher in the Rye* Holden is often interpreted as a socially awkward, abrasive, depressed, and somewhat confused member of society. The interpretations are driven by his complications with coming-of-age. His antisocial behavior causes discomfort for those around him while further alienating himself from society. When social cues fly over his head, attempts to redirect his behaviors fail and self–destructive behaviors run amuck. It can be quite easy to conclude that Holden is—for lack of a better term—a problem child; an individual who refuses to conform and is incapable of understanding social exchanges that occur on a daily basis. This, however, could be an erroneous deduction. Holden reflects habits that may lead to a placement on the spectrum of autism.

The word “autism” comes from the Greek word “autos” in which means “self”. The word choice references how the child is often removed from social situations both physically and mentally, ultimately describing someone alienated. The word was originally used to describe children with forms of social or emotional problems (Web M.D. 1).

Autism diagnoses are genetically caused conditions that are defined by “impairments in communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotypic patterns of behavior[sic], interests, and activities.” (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 2). First being acknowledged in the early 1900s, autism became known in the United States of America around the 1940s. This puts the American interests of autism roughly ten years before Salinger wrote *Catcher in the Rye*. Until the 1960s, researchers and doctors believed autism and schizophrenia to be closely related. Despite the differences in disorders being acknowledged, the treatment was often the same: drugs, electro-shock treatment, and behavioral tactics (Web M.D. 1).

Some general traits of autism are high stimuli response; issues with paying too much or too little attention; interest or obsession over objects, topics, or information; parroting; poor or exceptional coordination; delays in social or academic learning; lack of empathy; communication impairments; and repetition (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 7, 9, 11, 12). It is not uncommon that language skills can be lost between the ages of eight and twelve to the point of non-verbal communication, but the loss of verbal communication is not always permanent. If communication has not dissipated, the child may parrot what it has heard or repeat certain phrases over and over again. Furthermore, language is often taken literally; sarcasm, irony, facial expressions, or unspoken rules can often be lost on the person. It is important to note that not all autism is perfectly visible. It is also important to understand that there are people that live out in society with mild forms of autism. Autism is described as a spectrum. On one side, the child may have only one or no symptom(s) and the other side may have a child with every symptom. All children in between may have any combination of symptoms in many forms. Some people may appear to be immature, goofy/different, and even brilliant. Not all people with autism are socially awkward or struggle with academics (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 2, 7).

The habits that Holden maintains that would reflect autism the most would be his attentiveness, obsessiveness over certain topics, social and/or communicative struggles, and repetitive use of language. When analyzing these traits it is also important to note how the environment responds around him. Holden reflects several of the most traditional aspects of autism. Yet, if he is autistic, he is not severe. He has maintained an existence in society that would appear mostly functional.
One of the more obvious autistic traits Holden has is his lack of attention. This is not a trait unique to autism nor found with every child with autism, but it can be a familiar problem for some children with autism. Poorly transitioned thoughts and sporadic conversation are common with autism. It is important to note that Holden’s lack of attention or communication may not be Holden’s (or any person with autism’s) intention because “Limited social communication should not be interpreted as a lack of interest or unwillingness. It is more likely due to deficits in the ability to extract social information from social context” (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 8). Though the struggle to pay attention is not a trait unique to autism, it does show up often both in diagnosable autism and in Holden. Early on, Holden expresses an attention span that struggles to meet the environment’s expectation, as Holden struggles to apply himself in school. He expressed that even though he is failing his classes, he is choosing to not apply himself (Salinger 4). As he converses with Doctor Spencer, he clearly trails off in thought. As he “shoots the bull” (or dribbles on about senseless tom foolery as to why he wrote a bad paper for his professor), he finds himself lost in somewhat sporadic thoughts ranging from the ducks in New York to certain “phony” individuals (Salinger 10, 13). Holden’s thoughts lack any clear transition. This pattern of impaired attention and obliviousness to social context continues throughout the book. His attention issues are also occasionally projected. When enjoying the company of Sally, supposedly while yelling beyond his own comprehension, Sally, too, makes a note of his inability to calmly transition between thoughts. Holden rapidly jumps from topics of what he hates, to pants, to cars, and to horses to the point that Sally replies, “I don’t even know what you’re talking about, you jump from one—” as he cuts her off and jumps to a somewhat new topic (Salinger 131). Holden manifests numerous examples in which he struggles to stay on task with what’s on hand ranging from school, conversations, and hookers. The hooker Holden hires is a great example of both attentiveness and obsession. While with the prostitute, Holden jumps to different topics not just by reflex, but to cover up his innocence. His underdeveloped understanding of sex creates an innocent archetype as well as giving way to his obsession of sex which stems out of ignorance. His peers have shown interest in sex, and Holden doesn’t entirely understand why. His response is futile attempts to participate in the culture of sex. His obsession seems to be more closely aligned with social-parroting rather than a genuinely developed interest.

Parroting, an attribute of autism usually focusing on language, can be done with actions or topics. For instance, “There may be a tendency to perseverate on a topic. That is, to continually discuss one topic and have difficulty changing topics” (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 8). Parroting is different from repetition. Parroting occurs when one is seeing an action and mimics it. This could be as simple as word usage or mimicking interests. Repetition may not require seeing another individual and is done on a very frequent level. One physical example would be rocking back and forth when sitting or saying the same phrase or word over and over. Sex is a complex social interaction with roles, habits, and communication that can be easily lost on most individuals. When autism is added, sex may manifest as an other-worldly interaction – something odd or taboo. Sex is a topic Holden cannot let go of. This is partially because he expresses ignorance over the topic, “Sex is something I just don’t understand. I swear to God I don’t” (Salinger 63). However, sex is not something that can be ignored, especially in twentieth century United States. Instead, Holden parrots what he sees. People such as Stradlater or Luce were described as people who talk about sex. While talking to both of these individuals Holden often returns—sometimes forcefully—to the topic of sex whether it is relevant or not. Holden’s obsession over the topic of sex—and yet being completely clueless and unsure if he
wants it—reflects that he is not seeking it out over natural development but instead, observed development. Further examples of his ignorance of sex reflect that he does not fully understand the complexity or depth of intercourse.

This can be found when he tries to engage in the ritual. Holden shows little understanding for when to implement sexual actions. When Holden is dancing with the blonde girl at the bar, it is clear that she has no interest in him; she is providing Holden, for lack of a better phrase, a pity dance. Holden does acknowledge that her attention is elsewhere. To most people this would be enough to deter advancement. Instead, Holden tries to implement a kiss. The girl, being shocked that a guy she just met was trying to blatantly kiss her, rejects the action: Holden does not understand (Salinger 72). Holden is lacking an understanding of sexual (or romantic) relationships; specifically, that there is a time and a place. Beyond time and place, Holden expresses that communication is a problem with sex.

It can be easily seen that Holden struggles with unclear communication, a common trait with autism. If the communication is not literal or blunt, the message goes over his head and confuses him. Sarcasm and sex require certain state-of-mind qualities: sarcasm needs to be properly timed and both parties need to be in the mood for coitus. Many people with autism may express these difficulties in communication or social states. It is commonly acknowledged that autism may cause “difficulty understanding their own and other people’s mental states, including beliefs, desires, intentions, knowledge and perceptions, and problems understanding the connection between mental states and actions” (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 9). When plotting his prostitution experience, Holden expresses confusion over the communication surrounding sex. One example is his inability to stop talking. While both Holden and the prostitute are in the hotel room, Holden nearly talks the girl into lunacy instead of having sex. The fact that the prostitute doesn’t want to talk also leaves Holden dumbfounded. He is so confused on how to engage in sexual actions, all he can do is talk. When remembering the times that he had almost had sex, he confesses, “The thing is, most of the time when you’re coming pretty close to doing it with a girl—a girl that isn’t a prostitute or anything, I mean—she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don’t. I can’t help it. You never know whether they really want you to stop, or whether they’re just scared as hell, or whether they’re just telling you to stop so that if you do go through with it, the blame’ll be on you, not them” (Salinger 92). The topic of sex drives many of Holden’s thoughts and actions throughout the novel and better reflects obsession.

It is important that Holden’s obsession with sex does not get confused with repetition, an attribute of autism which can be both physical and social. In one instance, a child may watch the same fifteen seconds of a movie for an hour or rock back and forth for most of the day. The individual may also frequently associate key rituals with people; the individual with autism may have favorite people to do certain errands with and insist on doing the errand only with that specific peer. In Holden’s case, repetition does not drive social or self-actions. Instead there is a repetition of thoughts, sometimes used to cope with the current reality. Repetition and parroting can go hand in hand. Holden demonstrates this consistently through the novel with phrases such as “phony”, “it kills me”, and the “ducks.” The word choices of Holden reflect “repetitive and idiosyncratic language” which is not uncommon in autism (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit, 7). It could be claimed that these are just common phrases or jargon given the time and place of the story. The problem with that claim is that no one else in the book uses these words or inquiries. When dancing with the blonde at the bar, he heavily repeats the same point in regards to her dancing: “You’re such a good dancer” and “She can dance” are used to drive
much of his thoughts and conversation for the better part of two pages (Salinger 71, 72). The repetition is a communication fall back for Holden; if one does not know what to say, try saying the same thing over and over again.

One-sided conversations are also familiar with autism. This is in part because an individual with autism may not be able to pick up on subtle cues that the peer no longer wants to participate in the conversation (Emine Elif Vatanoglu-lutz, Ahmet Doğan ataman, Suat biçer 429). Holden has several instances where he seems to be having one-sided conversations. Previous to the moment when Stradlater confesses having an interest in Jane, Holden has an unmistakably one-sided conversation. Examples can also be found when talking to Luce and Holden’s sister—both characters seem to just accept his ramblings until they grow tired. Further examples of his social struggles can be found through involuntary actions. Individuals with autism may laugh at inappropriate times: “Some may engage in excessive or inappropriate laughing or giggling” (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 9). Holden experiences several teary moments in this novel (when he leaves the dorms, gets punched by the pimp, and talks with his sister when he is drunk) and expresses at each of them that he is unsure why he is crying. Most humans cry when having an emotional moment or have succumbed to inebriation—this is not unusual. However, when paired with a scene where his sister and he are in a verbal disagreement, he has a very unique reflection: “She was still sort of crying, and all of a sudden I did feel sort of sorry I said it . . . all of a sudden I did something I shouldn’t have. I laughed.” (Salinger 134). Incidents like these have hindered Holden’s ability to establish relationships with other individuals.

A person he greatly relates to is his sister. He compares her to his nearly adult persona. He asks, “What are you—a child for God’s sake?” and then later on says she “sounds like a school teacher” (Salinger 164, 167). This is because to him she is at a similar or higher social-mental development than he is. She even scrutinizes him when he confesses to being cut from school. Her character seems to develop almost entirely on her guardian archetype as if she has had to help raise him. She is not the first individual to recognize he needs guidance or is different. Luce even says he needs a psychoanalysis (Salinger 148). This leads Holden to alienate himself.

Humans with autism can often times be described as “being happiest when alone” (Emine Elif Vatanoglu-lutz, Ahmet Doğan ataman, Suat biçer, 427), which relates well to Holden’s desire to be a deaf mute off in a cabin. This is partially because he has been rejected by society for not understanding and meeting social expectations. Indeed he has nostalgia over a time when the world made sense. Holden often feels separated from society; his feeling of separation leads to his self-alienation. “I swear to god I’m crazy. I admit it.” (Salinger 124) “I meant it when I said it. I’m crazy. I swear to god I am” (Salinger 125). In fact, he even refers that he should have been a “crook” as a career choice: nearly embracing his alienation (Salinger 158).

Holden’s nostalgia from change should not come as a surprise, “an insistence on sameness and resistance to change” will often come in the standard package of autism (Saskatchewan Special Education Unit 11). When talking about the museum, Holden expresses great admiration over the fact that the museum changes very little. He describes it as “The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was … nobody’d be different” (Salinger 121).

The unwanted change can range from disruptions in daily routines to life changing events. He admires the static existence of the museum because it represents the inverse of what has perhaps been his greatest impairment: age. As people grow up they become much more complex and harder to understand. Children, as well as society viewed by children, is much less
complex. Perhaps when he was younger, everyone was like him. Everyone had one sided 
conversations, no sex, and no phoniness to impress someone or get along. People were just 
themselves. This is why his closest relations appear to be with his sister and dead brother. They 
were at a similar mental development as he was in regards to social interactions and complexity. 
This nostalgia for childhood can also be related to the ever important ducks. When one is a child 
at a park, an activity that one might partake in is feeding the ducks! Bring bread to the park and 
feed the ducks. What could be more fun? His interest in the ducks is nothing more than a 
youthful desire to watch and play with life, which is followed by the curiosity of their existence 
(or where they go during winter). This is also why he wants to be a catcher in the rye. He wishes 
to preserve childhood in a way that was never preserved for him—a way to share his social 
importance to others and be accepted. The cliff is not the fall of innocence but the cascade into 
social complications that develop as one grows and socializes.

If autism is indeed the case, then one must look at the novel through a different lens. 
When Ali dies, Holden has an emotional outburst and breaks the garage windows (Salinger 39). 
What might appear to be a disturbed boy with poor behavior might indeed be a child with autism 
being angry at the vague world for taking away someone who understood him—or perhaps was 
just good with individuals with autism. Where he might be considered a lazy, misogynistic, or 
rude individual, he may, indeed, just be someone with a different learning curve that was never 
given proper attention. Aside from Holden’s brother and sister, there is another character who 
shows potential for recognizing Holden’s mental state. 

Antolini would be a particularly unique scene to have to re-analyze. If Antolini 
recognized autism or children with problematic social, learning, and emotional problems, he may 
have had sympathy or empathy for Holden. If this is the case, the stroking of Holden’s head may 
not have been a sexual advance but one of a protective father archetype. What Antolini was 
perhaps admiring was Holden’s resilience or how far he has come. Furthermore, this is not the 
first person to do this to Holden. After leaving Antolini’s house Holden claims, “that kind of 
thing has happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid” (Salinger 193). Holden shows 
that this is not something unique. Instead, Holden’s hypersexual obsession just portrays the 
interaction as sexual.

Holden very much displays traits commonly found in individuals who land on the autism 
spectrum, although his autism is not severe. Instead, he displays an acute form of autism which 
in the past would have been defined as Asperger’s, a term that stemmed from a boy named Hans 
Asperger. The name association came from the child’s diagnosis of autism. He specifically 
showed traits associated with high-performance autism. He was more than sufficient in language 
and also talked about himself in a third person way. The man who worked with Hans was named 
Kanner and concluded that those with Asperger’s maintained “a lack of empathy, little ability to 
form friendships, one-sided conversations, intense absorption in a special interest, and clumsy 
movements” (Emine Elif Vatanoglu-lutz, Ahmet Doğan ataman, Suat biçer 429). Between 
Holden’s constant struggle with social interactions and his sometimes hard-to-swallow logic and 
interests, it would seem logical to diagnose him with a form of autism as it would explain much. 
Though Holden clearly depicts traits of depression, A.D.D., or simple social incompetence, none 
of these go far enough to explain all of Holden’s actions. Furthermore, autism is often 
accompanied with depression, difficulty with attention, and social struggles. It should only make 
sense to include these with the diagnosis of autism. This would mean Holden would have autism 
and depression; this conclusion would be an all-encompassing diagnosis that fully explains the 
actions, motive, and character that Holden is.
Autism, if truly a part of Holden’s life, shifts the book’s anatomy quite drastically. What was a book merely about innocence and alienation would now also become a book about how autism can impact an individual. This would require a complete re-analysis of Holden’s character as it adds quite a bit of speculation on narrator credibility. The diagnosis could also lead to a complete social shift in how the book is interpreted. What was once a socially awkward and depressed high school student instead becomes a vessel to empathizing with people who have autism and struggle with the very thing Holden struggles with: society.
In Loving Memory of Sammy May Greenwood

It wasn’t quite the record snowfall we had had the previous year, but at least the snowstorm happened on a weekday this time – rather than on a Saturday, thus giving the city enough time to plow the major roads on Sunday – so school was actually cancelled. Glancing out my window, I could see the unbroken snow sitting in our front yard, crisp and delicate. The sunlight shining down from the now-clear sky reflected blindingly from the flat, white surface.

After checking the temperature outside and seeing the 24° – not bitterly cold – I went to the kitchen to grab my coat, hat, and a pair of gloves. I stood at the top of the basement stairs as I slowly put them on.

“Sammy!” I called. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

Minutes later, I heard panting growing closer to the base of the steps, and, before long, the massive form of my dog lumbered through the doorway from the laundry room. She looked up at me with dark brown eyes surrounded by dark brown fur. The rest of her long coat was white with a few lighter brown splotches on her back. She wagged her tail, sending the curtain providing privacy for my parents’ bedroom fluttering in the makeshift breeze.

“Hey, Moose.” She received that nickname soon after we’d gotten her from the shelter. My reasoning? She’s big, she’s hairy, and she loves the winter. That’s not a dog, that’s a moose. “You wanna go for a walk?”

Panting even louder than before, Sammy leaned back on her haunches and launched herself up the stairs, practically hopping the entire way up. I quickly clipped on her collar and somehow managed to open the door with her entire body length blocking the way. She rushed out into the cool, winter air as fast as she could manage. This was her element. After all, the Saint Bernard was bred for this weather.

The Great St. Bernard Pass was named for St. Bernard de Menthon, an Augustine monk, who founded a monastery and hospice in the hopes of giving the many travelers safer passage. The pass sits in the Western Alps at approximately 8,100 feet above sea level. The pass is 49-miles long and has historically been one of the quickest routes between Italy and Switzerland. However, the snow in the pass only melts for a brief period during the summer. For the remainder of the year, the snow can get up to thirty-two feet deep, and the temperatures can drop as low as -30° Celsius, though the average is about -3° C.

In contrast, the average amount of snowfall in Eau Claire, Wisconsin is thirteen inches. The record for most snow in one day was broken in 2010 with twenty-two inches. The average temperature in winter is 8° Fahrenheit, and it rarely drops below -15° F.

The monks first obtained St. Bernards around 1660 or 1670, and the dogs were originally only used as companions and watchdogs. These dogs were descended from mastiff-style dogs, but they were specifically bred to tackle the harsh conditions of the Alps. They first became rescue dogs when servants from the monastery called marroniers were given the task of accompanying travelers and began regularly bringing along their dogs, as their broad chests helped clear snow from the pathways.

My dad had shoveled the driveway before he and my mom had left for work that morning, and that was where I chose to walk. Sammy, on the other hand, barreled straight into the snow. That expansive chest, which was passed down from generations ago, was now serving
the more personal task of propelling herself forward. The same could be said for her thick, powerful legs and large, snowshoe-like paws that allowed her to walk on ice or snow without a struggle.

The marroniers then found that their dogs possessed an incredible sense of smell and that they could use this ability to discover people who had been buried under fallen snow. They began sending them out on their own in groups of two or three in search of travelers who had gotten themselves lost or injured, particularly after avalanches. This practice would continue for the next 150 years.

When we reached the corner of our block, Sammy stopped and waited for me to check for traffic and give the go ahead. She used to not want to wait, but we had stopped her so many times, that she eventually just learned to do it herself. That is, unless there was a dog on the other side of the street. Then she would pull, and bark, and rear up on her hind legs, desperately trying to get to the other dog.

It’s always difficult to tell if she just wants to play with them, or if she wants take a bite out of them. She loves the little ones, especially. She stands over them, presumably to assert her dominance. That’s why she hates the Yellow Lab next door so much; they’re both dominant females.

Before we built the chain-link fence, we kept Sammy on a chain. She broke three of them. One of those times, she went and chased the neighbor dog around her house. When not actively working to free herself, she would continue digging a hole under the wooden fence lining only that one side of our property. It’s been there since my parents bought the house. To this day, she loves to stick her snout through that hole and spy on the neighbors. Saint Bernards are excellent at digging, though originally for a very different purpose.

When the St. Bernards would go out and find buried travelers, they would dig through the several feet of snow between the surface and the person they were searching for – another purpose for those massive paws.

We were quickly able to cross. This was a major road, so sidewalks had mostly been shoveled and the streets had been cleared, but there was still a thin layer of slush from the high amount of traffic in the area. My feet were safe from the dirty, gray wetness, as I was wearing boots, but I could still hear the half-liquid squelching beneath every step. It didn’t bother Sammy in the slightest as she continued to plow forwards. If she hadn’t been so excited for the walk, she might have stopped to roll around in it.

Once they had freed their find from a snowy prison, one of the dogs would then lie down on top of the traveler to provide warmth. Their hot breath and slobber was also important in clearing ice from exposed skin.

In Sammy’s case, the extreme drooling has really only ever served to cause dirt to stick to those strong legs and chest and leave the white fur permanently stained yellow. It stood out stark against the pure white of the snow as we made our way around the corner to trudge through the unplowed back roads and sidewalks.

While the first dog would tend to the traveler, the other dog or dogs would hurry back to the hospice, alerting the monks, who would rush out with a sled for transportation in case the person was too injured to walk.

Napoleon took the pass with his 250,000 soldiers while on a warpath to Italy between 1790 and 1810, and, by then, the monks’ system had become so well organized, not a single soldier lost his life. The soldiers would later tell tales of the heroic rescues made by the St. Bernards.
During this same period of time, the most famous St. Bernard, Barry, was born and lived at the monastery. From 1800-1812, Barry is known to have saved the lives of at least 40 people, probably more. He was retired in 1812 and lived out the remainder of his life in a home in the valley. In 1815, Barry's taxidermy body was given to Berne, Switzerland’s Natural History Museum, where it has been on exhibit ever since.

Halfway around the neighborhood, we came across Pinehurst sledding hill. Both of us stopped to look at it for a short while. When I see it, all I can think about is how it used to be such a private place for local kids. The top of the hill was completely covered with pine trees, like the majority of the surrounding area, but the entire hill stands barren now. The city wanted to encourage more tourism in the area, so they installed a tow rope, and now it’s flooded with people.

The Great Saint Bernard Pass, alternatively, has no trees. It’s situated too far up in the mountains. There is, however, an abundance of alpine flowers, such as forget-me-nots, glacier buttercups, and white dryads. The rocks in the area also tend to be covered with moss and lichen.

I doubted that was the reason Sammy stopped, though, and I wondered if her instincts were kicking in to be on the lookout for an avalanche.

After all, the monastery’s St. Bernards have been credited with saving lives totaling to more than 2,000 people during their time in service.

After a few moments, Sammy turned her nose away and continued walking. She never did like people. My dad is the only one she really cares about. She only tolerates the rest of us — unless there’s food involved.

I studied Sammy as she wove through a big enough gap in between the many cars lining the curb. There were no sidewalks on this side of the street, so we had to either tramp through the snow-covered grass or cross to the other side. We were only a couple blocks from home, and Sammy increased her gait. Her hips swayed as she walked, mostly due to her splay-footedness — her back paws point outwards rather than straight.

Most people don’t even realize that Sammy is rather small for a Saint Bernard. The males can get to be over 200 pounds. Sammy only weighs about 130 pounds.

The original Saint Bernards were much smaller in size, usually weighing in somewhere between 80 and 90 pounds. Their fur was typically shorter and reddish brown and white in color, and they had longer tails. The monks tried breeding them with Newfoundlands, assuming that the longer hair would offer better protection from the freezing temperatures. Unfortunately, ice would form on their fur, and they were no longer effective as rescue dogs. The monks then gave these dogs to people living nearby in the Swiss valleys.

Eventually, people started to carelessly breed the original Saint Bernards with multiple different types of dogs. Cross-breeding with dogs such as the English Mastiff ended with their common modern appearance. They weren’t given their official name of Saint Bernard until 1880, when the breed was finally recognized by the Swiss Kennel Club.

When we finally arrived back to our house, Sammy trotted up the driveway and tried to go around to the backyard. I had to tug hard on her leash to stop her, nearly slipping on the ice that avoided being chucked into the yard by my dad’s shovel. She turned her head to glare at me, obviously annoyed, and refused to come to me. I huffed out a breath and walked over to her to unclip the leash from her collar, replacing it with chain number two.

“There you go, Moose,” I said, ruffling her ears. “Go stalk the neighbors.”
Dramatic Writing
Micaela Strait
“Bar Code”

Instructor: Hello and welcome to today's lesson. Today we will be learning how to “properly” pick up girls at bars. First let us meet our participants today. This is Alex (points to Alex) and he is your everyday average drunk guy at the bar looking to get some hot action from any of the ladies here tonight. And if you refuse his advances he will call you a whore, slut, lesbo, and all other horrendous names in the book, yet society lets this just slip by because he is a drunk man, and heaven forbid they should be held accountable for their actions. Next is Carl, he is what you would call the “Sober Creep-”

(Carl interrupts)

Carl: Ummmm, no I'm not a creep I’m the “Nice Guy” that hangs at the bar. (smiles smugly)

Instructor: Well honestly, Carl, the guys that call themselves the “Nice Guys” at the bars are usually the creepers waiting to drug some poor, unsuspecting girl or be the ones to just get all up on the girl, and even though the girl might not like this, again, society just lets this go by, because, hey, it's a man, and men cannot control what goes on in their lower regions. Now, last but not least is our lovely victim- I MEAN volunteer named Vikki.

Vikki: Wait, I thought this was an audition for a Covergirl commercial?

Instructor: Oh no, hun. You are going to be the eye candy these too will be gawking at and trying to seduce throughout this whole shebang.

Vikki: What?! And I have to take this? I have no say at all in this?

Instructor: Nope. For you are a woman at a bar. Therefore, by the rules of society, you are just here to look pretty, be dumb, laugh at the jokes the men tell you, show off your tits, ass or both to them and go suck them off in the bathroom later tonight, because once a man hits on you, you are obligated to do at least that.

(Vikki looks horrified at the Instructor) Now please, go take your seat. It's time to start the lesson.

(everyone takes their place, Vikki takes a little longer to sit, clearly not wanting to be a part of this at all)

Vikki: (whispers) I'm going to kill my agent for this.

Instructor: Ok, so let us begin. Both Alex and Carl have been at the bar for about an hour. Alex has had five beers and thinks he is the hottest of shits and that he can get into any girl's pants (looks at Vikki) and this is where you come in, hun.

Vikki: For the love of god!
**Instructor**: Now, Carl has had nothing to drink, he is completely sober and wanting to find a *(Looks at card Carl has written on)* “A pretty kitty to pet and cuddle with”?! *(looks at Carl)* See, this is why I said you were a creep.

**Carl**: What? I just want to show a kitty a good time, if you know what I mean. *(Wink to Vikki, and the Instructor, if Instructor is a girl)*

*(Vikki looks like she wants to hurl, Instructor gives creeped out/sorry look to Vikki)*

**Instructor**: Carl, just shut up. Anyways he wants to...yeah we’ll not say that again. So he goes on the search to find a young woman, or maybe even a furry, I don't know. *(looks at Vikki again)* Sorry about this. First, Alex spots Vikki. Let’s see how he approaches her.

**Alex**: *(if you can slur your words a little, remember you’re drunk-ish, walks over to Vikki)* Hey you sexy babe you *(drunken laugh)* I see you have all of the three things I love in a woman *(Leans in close to Vikki)*

**Vikki**: Oh really? And what would those be?

**Alex**: Two tits and a nice Pus- *(Instructor cuts him off before finishing the word)*

**Instructor**: OK, THAT IS ENOUGH!! Dude, I know you're drunk and all but come on! We have to keep the language not so blunt once we start the lesson, ok? I mean we want to be able to have high school teachers show this to their students, otherwise how else are men going to learn how to treat girls, and how would girls learn how to act towards men!

**Alex**: Oh, sorry man. I’ll try to calm it down a bit. For the children! *(Goes back to where he was originally standing)*

**Instructor**: Thank you. Now after Alex left, Carl spotted Vikki and went over to say hello. *(looks at audience)* This should be fun...let’s watch, shall we?

**Carl**: Why hello there. I couldn’t help but notice that you’re the prettiest girl in the whole bar.

**Vikki**: Umm, thanks...

**Carl**: No problem, but why are you here alone? Pretty girls should never be alone! Especially when they’re wearing clothes as sexy as yours! *(touches Vikki’s shoulder)*

**Vikki**: *(moves shoulder away)* What are you talking about? I am in jeans and a t-shirt with a jacket on!!!!!!

**Carl**: Yeah, but the thought of what’s under all of it is the sexy part.
(Carl tries to touch Vikki’s neck, but she stands up and looks at the Instructor)

Vikki: Hold up, why didn't you interject in this scenario? I mean this creep is rubbing up on me and talking to me like I'm a sex toy, and you don't bat an eye, but when the other guy almost says the P word, you jump down his throat?!?

Instructor: Well, like I told Alex, we have to watch it with the cursing, because if there is swearing, then schools won't show this to their students.

Vikki: But letting this guy basically fuck me with his mind is ok?!?

Instructor: Yep. As long as he doesn't swear while doing so. Now please, Vikki, sit back down, and please, no more swearing. You don't understand how much money it costs to censor out your dirty mouths! Now please, we are almost done here. We have two more scenarios left to get through.

(Vikki sits down and Carl goes back to his spot)

Vikki: Dear god, why am I doing this?

Instructor: Ok, so the men have said hello, and now it is time to buy her a drink. Maybe then she will feel more obligated to “pay you back.” Alex, you’re up.

Alex: (goes to Vikki, holding two shots in his hands) Hey, babe. I got a shot here with your name on it! (goes to take his shot, it misses his mouth and splashes on his shoulder/ floor behind him) Here you go, babe (Goes to hand Vikki the shot, he trips and spills it on her, try to get it on her chest region)

Vikki: Ugh, you stupid, drunk ass! You ruined my new shirt!

Alex: Oh babe, I’m sorry. Here, let me help you with that! (Alex tries to bring his mouth to the wet spot on Vikki’s shirt to suck up the shot, Vikki yelps and pushes him away. He stumbles and falls on the floor by his spilled drink.)

Instructor: Oh hey, Alex, since you’re down there… (throws him a towel) Clean up the mess you made!

(Alex cleans up the mess slowly, starts to cry over the fact he lost his shots.)

Instructor: (in a caring voice) Alex, stop crying. We have an open bar here, remember? Once you finish cleaning, you can get more shots.

Alex: This is the best day ever! (Alex starts to clean faster with more enthusiasm)
Instructor: Ok, Carl. It is your turn to get the voluptuous Vikki a taste of sin.

(Carl gets up from his spot to go over to Vikki, only to be pushed out of the way by a very excited Alex on his way to get more booze. Carl stumbles but recovers and goes over to the very unhappy Vikki.)

Vikki: *(cleaning the drink off her shirt. Ignoring Carl)* Oh great! This is going to leave a stain!

Carl: *(Standing beside Vikki, putting his arm around her shoulder and squeezing her slowly and seductively through this whole part, trying to get closer to her breasts)* Hey, cutie pie. Do you want me to wet your whistle for you? *(Before Vikki can answer, Carl gets a drink from the back of the bar, already in a cup)*

Vikki: *(takes Carl’s hand/arm and removes it off of her.)* No thank you!

Carl: Why not, baby doll? *(looking hurt)*

Vikki: Because I am pretty sure you drugged that drink. I mean you pulled it out of nowhere. Who the fuck made that drink anyways?

Carl: *(Looking at the Instructor, ignoring the fact that Vikki is there)* Um, Instructor. She keeps swearing at me!

Instructor: I actually agree with Vikki on this. Where did you get that drink?

Carl: *(Now very upset)* WHAT?! HOW DARE YOU SAY SUCH THINGS ABOUT ME?! I AM THE NICEST GUY THIS BROAD IS EVER GOING TO MEET!! SHE SHOULD FEEL HONORED THAT I TOOK MY TIME TO PICK HER OUT SUCH AN EXPENSIVE DRINK, INSTEAD OF BEING SUCH AN UNGRATEFUL WHORE THAT SHE IS!!

*(Vikki is just looking at Carl with dumbfounded disgust)*

Instructor: I actually agree with Vikki on this. Where did you get that drink?

Carl: *(Now very upset)* WHAT?! HOW DARE YOU SAY SUCH THINGS ABOUT ME?! I AM THE NICEST GUY THIS BROAD IS EVER GOING TO MEET!! SHE SHOULD FEEL HONORED THAT I TOOK MY TIME TO PICK HER OUT SUCH AN EXPENSIVE DRINK, INSTEAD OF BEING SUCH AN UNGRATEFUL WHORE THAT SHE IS!!

*(Vikki is just looking at Carl with dumbfounded disgust)*

Instructor: Carl, you didn't spend a dime on that drink if you did get it from here. *(said slowly)*

We have an open bar, remember?

*(Carl looks horrified, then looks upset)*

Carl: Never mind then, just forget it.... *(pulls out a garbage can from behind the bar and drops the cup in it, then walks back to his spot)*

Instructor: Well, that went well...... For our last scenario it is time to try and woo Vikki over. What will the guys do to achieve this? Let's start with Alex.
(Alex stumbles over)

Alex: Sorry, Instructor. While you were working with Carl, I had myself, like, ten shots.

Instructor: It’s ok, Alex. No big deal. Do you think you can still do this?

Alex: Yeah, I can. After all, it was only five shots!

(Instructor looks at Alex)

Instructor: I thought you said it was ten shots?

(Alex starts to wobble and grabs the bar to hold himself up)

Alex: Yeah, but I spilled, like, 80% on the floor, so 80% of ten is five, right?

Instructor: Sure, Alex, sure. Just get on with this, ok?

(looks at Vikki but doesn't quite “See her”)

Alex: (at this point very drunk) How ‘bout you and this guy here (pointing to himself) go have some fun, and I can treat you like the slut that you are?

(Vikki slaps Alex)

Vikki: GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME, YOU DRUNK ASSHOLE!!

Alex: Whatever... BEOCH!! You know what you are?... (Falls over, passed out from all the alcohol)

Instructor: Well, ok then. As you can see, you shouldn’t get too drunk while trying to pick up girls at a bar, or that could happen to you. (points to Alex as he is being dragged out of the way by Carl) Thanks, Carl…Um, you’re a bit too good at dragging passed out people... (takes a step back) Well, it’s your turn now. Go for it.

(Carl runs up to Vikki and tries to kiss her/ grope her)

(Vikki ducks and “Knees” Carl in the balls)

Carl: (gasping for air) What the Fffffff-

Instructor: Ah-ah-ah! (shakes finger at Carl) No swearing. (happy tone)

Carl: What the frick frack paddy whack did you do that for?! (still gasping for air)
Vikki: Because I'm fucking tired of this crap! *(Instructor goes to tell Vikki that she can't swear, but Vikki glares at the instructor and cont.)* I am not some fucking eye candy for you little boys to be drooling over! I am a human being! I don't have to take this! *(looks at instructor)* I don't “owe” them anything just because I am a woman! And you know what else?! Even if you didn't do this fucking crap and actually treated me like an equal, you still wouldn't get anything from me, because I am a fucking lesbian! So you all can suck my invisible dick! I AM SO OUT OF HERE !!(Vikki leaves the room in a huff and kicks Carl once more while she passes him)

Instructor: … Well, this was interesting… *(say this slowly as if wondering why even saying it at all)* And that, class, is how to pick up chicks at a bar. Have a nice day, and remember to… um… *(looks at card)* “remember to find the best kitty there is…” OH, GOD DAMN IT, CARL! ENOUGH WITH THE KITTY THING ALREADY! *(throws papers/cards down and leaves the passed out Alex, and the clearly in pain Carl, on the floor and turns off the lights)*
Bryant Hafemeyer
“Closure”

CHARACTERS

JAKE: 42, Ex-husband of Sheila, successful international real estate investor/developer, dresses well below his means, such as a common man.

SHEILA: 42, Ex-wife of Jake, successful boutique fashion designer, dressed to the 10’s

MEDIATOR HAMMER: 64, retired judge, now doing mediation work on the side.

SCENE 1: THE MEDIATION

Jake & Sheila had somewhat recently ended a tumultuous seven-year marriage. They had managed to divide up the assets and properties they owned over several tension filled mediation sessions, and everyone was at their breaking point. Luckily there were just a few remaining assets remaining to divide; real estate properties the couple owned.

SETTING:

Mediator Hammer, Jake, and Sheila, sitting at a conference room table, legal art and bookshelves flanking them. Hammer at the end, Jake to his right, Sheila to his left.

TIME

Present, mid afternoon

MEDIATOR HAMMER

(Walking in from the “door” off stage, then sitting at the table, looking down at papers)

Let’s see if we can finish this week, eh?

JAKE

I’ll bet against that.

SHEILA

Sure, why not lose that bet, you’ve lost every other bet you’ve placed.

JAKE

You mean like the one I made marrying you?

SHEILA

Oh, c’mon now, the only bad gamble you made related to this marriage was sleeping with anything with two legs and a propensity for bad decisions and not thinking it’d do irreparable harm.

MEDIATOR HAMMER

(taking glasses off his face, rubbing his eyes)

Oh, for Christ sake, would you two put away your daggers for two damn minutes? Let’s get through this already. There are only a few remaining items to divvy up and then we all, especially me, can move on.
JAKE
Oh, come on Hammer, it’s just a little playful banter. Sheila likes it, it was the foundation of our relationship; hot, steamy banter that, of course, led to other exciting levels of our relationship…

SHEILA
(Chuckles Sarcastically)

MEDIATOR HAMMER
I don’t care what it is; let’s just get on with it.

JAKE & SHEILA
Fine.

MEDIATOR HAMMER
Okay, we have three remaining properties. Let’s start with the estate in St. Bart’s.

SHEILA
Jake can have that one. It was his property before we got married; the first one he ever purchased. It’s only fair.

JAKE
And I’ll make the Paris flat easy as well, that goes to Sheila. It’s close to her fashion studio, and it has her impeccable taste, which is frankly too high class for me anyhow.

MEDIATOR HAMMER
Well, that seemed entirely too easy…

(Setting aside the two previous folders, and opening the last one)

Okay, last item, the New York apartment in Tribeca.

JAKE
(Head down, staring at his interlocked hands)

We’ll sell it.

SHEILA
(Sitting in silence)

MEDIATOR HAMMER
(Head down, flipping through pages)

Sheila?

SHEILA
(Remains in silence, biting her lower lip)

MEDIATOR HAMMER
(Looking up over the top of his glasses towards Sheila)
Sheila? What are you thinking?

SHEILA

There’s just so many memories. I don’t know what to do.

JAKE

C’mon, Sheila, it’s best we sell it.

SHEILA

No, I don’t thin-

JAKE

(Becoming fidgety in his chair, looks straight at Sheila)

Listen, it’s best for everyone, there’s nothing there for either of us.

SHEILA

(Bristling at Jake’s comment)

How can you be so obtuse?! Nothing there? How about all the memories? It’s the thing that most connects us to her!

MEDIATOR HAMMER

(Looking perplexed, shaking his head a bit)

I’m sorry, what am I missing? Who?

SHEILA

(head cocked to the side, looking straight into Jake’s eyes)

Our daughter.

JAKE

(Clenses his fists, bangs them on the table in frustration)

MEDIATOR HAMMER

Woah, whoa, whoa. Okay, things are getting a little tense; let’s take a br-

SHEILA

Hammer, please excuse us for a moment.

MEDIATOR HAMMER

I don’t think-

SHEILA:

(without breaking her stare down of Jake)


(Hammer exits)
JAKE

Listen, I don’t understand. Keeping that place will only bring pain. Neither of us wants to be there. We’ll just sell it.

SHEILA

No, we won’t.

JAKE

I don’t-

SHEILA

I don’t care what you want. We’re going to keep that property.

(Now, leaning over the table, pointing at Jake aggressively)

As a matter of fact, every year on that day, we’re going to go back there, together.

JAKE

Just stop.

SHEILA

I’m going to make dinner. Lasagna; you know, Emma’s favorite.

JAKE

(picking his head up sharply at the sound of her name)

SHEILA

We’re going to sit there, like the perfect little family I pretended we were. We’re going to place her picture on the table in front of her seat.

JAKE

God damnit, Sheila, I’m warning you!

SHEILA

We’re going to watch her favorite movie afterwards, with a fire in the fireplace, just like we used to do.

JAKE

Sheila!

SHEILA

And then, you’re going to go for a swim.

JAKE

(Now standing at the table)

Damnit, Sheila, enough!

SHEILA
You’re going to go swim in the very pool that Emma drowned in. The one where you left her to die while you were busy inside fulfilling your selfish sexual needs with your assistant before she left for the day, while I was at the store.

JAKE

Enough!

SHEILA

No, not enough! We will not sell that home. We will go back there every year together, so you too can relive the horror that I re-imagine every day of my life in my mind. The one that you allowed to happen, because of your own selfishness. I’m going to make you relive the life that you ripped away from us. I’m going to make you ache while you take in all the surroundings that evoke the memories of the daughter we no longer have because of you. I’m going to make your heart break over and over just like mine. You’re going to sit there and watch me as I reminisce and crumble. You may not have been guilty of anything in the court of law, but tell that to me Jake, tell that to our daughter! That is your sentence Jake!

JAKE

(Shouting in a pleading manner)

It was a freak accident. She slipped getting out of the pool, cracked her head, and slipped back into the water.

SHEILA

A freak accident that, had you been being a dad instead of an infidel, you would have been able to prevent.

JAKE

(Aggression now relenting, speaking in a calmer tone)

We had let her play in the pool alone many times before.

SHEILA

No, we didn’t. I didn’t. Only you did.

JAKE

(Jakes tone now begging)

You think I don’t relive that scene every day of my life? You weren’t the one to find her. I was! I was the one who pulled her out of the pool, who tried to resuscitate her, who watched her die in my arms.

SHEILA

(Taking her arms and knocking papers and lamp off the conference room table)

How dare you play martyr!

JAKE

(Tone desperate)
She died in my arms Sheila.

SHEILA

(Grabbing her things, putting on her sunglasses, walking out of the conference room. Turning back as she walks out the door)

Don’t fool yourself Jake. We both know that she was dead long before the comfort of her father could carry her into angelhood.

FADE OUT:

JAKE LEFT STANDING THERE AT THE TABLE, STARING UP AT THE CEILING, WIPING TEARS FROM HIS EYES. LIGHT SLOWLY DIMS, SOUNDS OF CHILD’S LAUGHTER AND SPLASHING PLAYING FAINTLY IN THE BACKGROUND.

END SCENE

SCENE 2: THE MEDIATION

SETTING:

A couple months have passed. Sheila and Jake are in the kitchen of their Tribeca property. Sheila agreed to sell the place, and Jake is there to pick some items up.

TIME

Present, evening

JAKE

(Setting a box on the table in the kitchen, Sheila’s back turned to Jake while she is at the stove) Sheila, I know that this hasn’t been easy on either of us, especially you, but I’m glad you changed your mind.

SHEILA

(Wiping her hands on her apron, turning towards Jake) Well, Jake, after our last mediation, I realized I was tired. I was tired of fighting with you; I was tired of thinking of what could have been. I was just, tired. I realized it was time to move on, and that this would help bring closure to a chapter in my life.

JAKE

(Slowly nodding) I hate to say it, but I think we’ll both be better off if we can move on. I appreciate that.

SHEILA

(Slowly walking over to Jake, placing her hands on Jake’s chest) Listen, I know it’s odd, but how about dinner here? I already started Em’s favorite, lasagna. It will help with the closure, if we can have one final dinner. I don’t know, like we used to as a family, like we did when we moved in our first night.
JAKE

(Pausing for a moment, then reaching over and picking up a bottle of wine)

Only if I can bring the wine…

(LIGHTS FADE BLACK)

(WHEN LIGHTS FADE BACK IN, THEY RETURN TO ABOUT 50%, SPOTLIGHTED ON THE TWO ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER AT THE TABLE, FOOD IN FRONT OF THEM, JAKE EATING AND DRINKING, SHEILA JUST SIPPING AWAY AT A GLASS OF WINE. THEY APPEAR TO BE HAVING A DISCUSSION WITH EACH OTHER, POINTING, TALKING, LAUGHING)

(LIGHT FADES BACK TO BLACK AFTER ABOUT 30 SECONDS)

(LIGHTS FADE BACK IN FULLY, THE TWO AT THE TABLE, JAKE JUST FINISHING HIS MEAL)

JAKE

(Elbows on table, pointing at Sheila with his fork)

You haven’t touched your food.

SHEILA

Yeah, well, I’m just not all that hungry.

JAKE

We’ll you’re missing out; this was the best you’ve ever made.

(Jake pauses and says somberly)

Em would have raved about it.

SHEILA

(Takes a sip from her wine glass, seemingly ignoring his compliment)

JAKE

(Starting to shake his head slowly, and clenching and unclenching his fist)

SHEILA

(Eyes still down, staring at her wine glass, flexing her jaw)

Something wrong Jake?

JAKE

I don’t- I don’t feel so great.

SHEILA

(Still looking down at her wine glass as she swirls the contents)

JAKE
(Becoming visibly ill and pained, stumbles up from his seat, stares at Sheila as she refused to look at him)

Sheila…

(Pause – no response)

Sheila…

(Pause – no response)

SHEILA!

(Pause – no response)

What did you do?!

SHEILA

I’m glad you liked the food, Jake. It had a special ingredient, something I added just for you.

(Sheila pulls a mini bottle from her pocket and sets it on the table)

I must say, it’s taken longer than expected to have an effect on you. The person I got it from assured me it would be quick.

JAKE

(In a panic, hunched over in pain)

You poisoned me!

(Jake stumbles out a “back” door to the backyard pool area, struggling to keep his feet and balance, making grunts and sounds of struggle as he does so)

The sound of “Song for Viola” by Peter Bradley Adams starts to play softly in the background

SHEILA

(Looking at her glass, takes another sip, stands up and walks out the back door after Jake, glass still in hand)

JAKE

(Now on his hands and knees, struggling to maintain control of his muscles, they are freezing up on him)

Why? You said you were ready to move on; you said that you wanted closure.

SHEILA

(Crouched down in a squat position at Jake’s side, moves the hair out of her face and looks at him)

I did, and I am. However, what did you think I was ready to move on from? From the death of my daughter? Oh, Jake. I’ll never be able to move on from that. That’s a pain I will endure for the rest of my life. What I meant was that I was ready to move on from you, to gain closure in our relationship, and to gain closure for our daughter. Sure, we divorced, but as long as you’d be alive, I’d live with thoughts of what I would like to do to you. Well, now I can close the book on you.
JAKE
(lying mostly paralyzed, struggling to get out words)
Sheila, please. Call help.

(Pause – no response)
Sheila, PLEASE!

SHEILA
(Setting glass on a nearby table, reaching down and dragging Jake’s mostly paralyzed body by the edge of the pool. Rests her foot on his chest.)
Sorry, Jake. There’s nobody here to save you now, just like how you weren’t there to save Em.

JAKE
(Struggling to speak, stammering)
You’ll never get away with this.

SHEILA
You’re probably right; I won’t get away with this, but…
(pausing for effect)
I can live with it. I have nothing else to live for, you made sure of that of while ago.

(She pushes his body into the “pool.” Jake rolls off the stage, sounds of splash play over the music. She turns around, walks confidently back into the house, puts her hands on an empty chair at the table they ate at [implied where Emma sat], looks up to the heavens for a moment, puts her hands to her lips, exhales deeply, and walks off stage).

FADE OUT:

LIGHTS DIM TO BLACK, THE ENDING OF “SONG FOR VIOLA” PLAYS INTO THE DARKNESS.
THE END
Patrick Slattery
Melissa France
Kourtney Sande
Hannah Brunner
Jacob Smuda
Kelci Greenwood
Megan McGarvey
Robert Adams
Bryant Hafemeyer
Gavin Johnson
Jade Wong

Justin Thompson
Micaela Strait
Joseph Maxwell
Emily Koch
Faith King
Leah Greenwood
Auriana Audette
Phillip Wilken
Amy Anderson
Chad Hermans
Josh Terway