

# Serendipity

By Comsewogue High School's Literary Magazine Club

SONGWRITER 06/2022  
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Cover by Lydia McGuigan

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*POETRY*

## FEMALE ENERGY, PART 2

By Grace Jos

Inspired by Willow Smith's  
"Female Energy, Part 2"



oh, and I'm falling into the arms of a naked truth  
to be smaller, taper me if you must  
the stride of step, too long  
the curls of my lips,  
and the curves on my hips too wide  
I am human, I am woman

not surprised to see the sky and know what I must do  
with the masculine sky,  
and the feminine clouds

I float, aimlessly  
I can't hold, cradle, soothe  
only float

tell me, how am I to feel?  
when there's a prominent feeling of being so small,  
and so large all at once,  
a feeling of inferiority,

naked under the presence of truth, I need to divulge  
I'm aware, I'm on the brink of impropriety

I will one day be the sky, the ocean, the earth  
I will own being the clouds, and all that surrounds it

I will sing a perpetual song of euphoria,  
and all will hail in glory  
a song of femininity,  
and all will listen

# THIS POEM

By Joe Finn

Inspired by George Harrison's  
"This Song"



What can I say about this poem?  
I probably ripped it off from somewhere.  
Someone probably wrote this before me.  
Whoever that is, they'll probably sue me.

What else can I say about this poem?  
It's not very good,  
It's a waste of data on this computer.  
It shouldn't have been thought of.

What *else* can I say about this poem?  
It pales in comparison to the other poems.  
Some of these pieces are absolutely stunning.  
Have you seen the artwork?

What *else* can I say about this poem?  
I should have picked a better song to base it on.  
There are so many other songs to write about  
And I pick *this one*?

In the end,  
What can I say about this poem?  
It's mine.  
And I wouldn't want it any other way.

# SEE YOU LATER (TEN YEARS)

Inspired by Jenna Raine's  
"see you later (ten years)"



By Lucia Simonetti

*First day of second grade:*

The new boy keeps pulling strands of my hair.

**I keep trying to get her attention.**

My mom told me to ignore someone if they are mean.

**What else do I have to do to get her to turn around?**

I threw an eraser at him.

**Her attention is on me for a few seconds.**

He starts playing with my hair again and I let him.

**I like her.**

I hate him.

*Summer:*

I sit on the sand and watch the waves crash.

**I stumble to the beach.**

I see him collapse onto the sand once again.

**I fall to my knees, laughing to myself.**

He lies down, letting the alcohol run its course.

**I spread myself out on the sand and bask in this familiar feeling of bliss.**

I hate him.

**I love this feeling.**

How could he do this to himself? To his family? To the people who care about him?

**No one cares.**

Why is he so selfish?

**Why am I so selfish?**

He reaches for the bottle again, an action I was familiar with seeing growing up.

**I lift the bottle to my lips when reality starts to become clearer.**

That's enough. I walk over to him and snatch the bottle from his hands.

**My comfort is ripped from my grip, she has it now.**

It's for his own good.

**I hate her.**

*Graduation:*

I'm so excited to tell him.

**I'm dreading this.**

Everything is finally working out.

**This is going to break her heart.**

We're going to start our lives together.

**I need to set her free.**

He's doing so much better.

**It's not fair that she's always worried about me.**

I really care about him.

**I love her.**

*College:*

I need to stop thinking about him.

**She's all I think about.**

How could he do this to me? To us?

**I'm doing what's best for both of us.**

Why does this hurt so much?

**We need to learn how to be apart before we can be together.**

It's hard being so far away.

**It's better that she left.**

I'm going to be okay.

**She's going to be okay. We will be okay.**

I hate him.

**I will always love her.**

*Years later...:*

Is it really him?

**Am I seeing things?**

This has to be a dream.

**It is her.**

It's actually him.

**It's been so long since I've seen her.**

It seems like it has been forever.

**She looks happy.**

He looks so much better than before.

**I asked her how she is.**

I asked if he's seeing anyone.

**It's only ever been her.**

He won't even look me in the eye.

**How can she even look at me after what I did?**

I try to hold back the tears.

**I tell her I miss her.**

How am I supposed to believe him?

**I hold her for the last time.**

He gives me a hug.

**I get home and break down.**

I cry as we walk away from each other once again.

**I lost her.**

I love him.

*Few days later...:*

I can't stop thinking about him.

**I can't get her out of my mind.**

I walk to the place where we last saw each other.

**I take a walk to clear my head, it isn't working.**

I let out a breath of relief when I see him.

**My breath catches in my throat when I see her.**

I tell him how much I've missed him.

**I apologize for breaking us up years ago.**

I tell him I still love him.

**I tell her I love her.**

I can finally breathe again.

**We found our way back to each other.**

I'm in love with him.

**I'm in love with her.**



# WHAT DOES IT MEAN

*By Macy Carter*

I found a lovely poem  
Written out in green  
I think it was a song  
I think, about me

Four measures scribbled on the back,  
A charming melody  
I played it soon as I got home  
It sounded rather pretty

I found it near the garbage,  
Thrown, but folded, neat and clean  
Entitled, "To You, From Me"  
What does it mean?

A shoe vanished round the corner,  
As if it knew it had been seen  
When I woke the next morning,  
I thought it was a dream

Years later, here I live  
In my apartment by the sea  
Everyday I gaze outside  
At the hurrying, shuffling feet

Sometimes I go to the boardwalk  
And play a melody  
Today, I reread that song  
What does it mean?

I grab my guitar  
And walk to the beach  
I sit down and start to play  
That charming melody

It takes me by the hand  
And pulls into a memory,  
One of when I found that poem  
Written out in green

I open my eyes and see a girl  
Standing beside me  
Tears are welling in her eyes  
What does it mean?

She pulls me by the arm and asks,  
“Where did you get that melody?”  
“I found it, years ago.”  
She furrows her brow back at me

I tell her how I found the song,  
Written out in green,  
A poem that I thought  
Could be about me

How I thought I dreamt the paper,  
Folded neat and clean,  
And the shoe around the corner  
Because what could it mean?

I hand her the paper  
She takes it gingerly  
She glances up and whispers,  
“The songwriter is me.”

I talk to her awhile  
We walk on the beach  
Finally, she tells me  
The song was about me

She says she’s glad I found it  
She wanted to give it to me  
I look at the poem then back at her  
What does it mean?

# A LANGUAGE JUST FOR US

Inspired by Namika's "Je ne parle pas français  
(feat. Black M) - Beatgees Remix"



By Panika Garg

Standing all alone  
Lost somewhere  
Where am I  
How did I get here

À la Champs Elysées  
What a view  
Architecture so riveting  
Language so enchanting

Taking in the sounds  
The smells  
The sights

Taking it in  
Before it all goes to hell  
Before going back to reality  
Where work means stress  
And stress means depression  
Where down meets up  
And the sky is never blue

But for now  
I am here

"Salut, qu'est-ce que vous cherchez?"  
I hear  
Huh?  
Uh oh

A French person  
Speaking French  
"Je ne parle pas français"  
I don't speak French

He keeps talking  
A voice so captivating  
So enthralling  
I don't know what he's saying  
But I wish I did

\*\*\*

A girl standing there  
Her profile against the sun  
Wavy hair in the slight breeze  
Lips quirked upward  
Almost a smile

She looks lost  
But also not  
Like she has no clue where she is or how she got there  
But she knows that's where she's meant to be

I go closer  
Her eyes devouring the sights  
The people  
The language  
The culture  
She looks in love with this city  
Just like me

Hey Miss  
"Ich spreche nicht Deutsch"  
I don't speak german  
But let me show you Paris  
This timeless city  
Let me be your guide  
Your Aladdin in this city of love

I can't help myself  
From talking to her  
It's like my mind is disconnected  
From the rest of my body  
She's so  
Alluring

I'm misunderstood  
Thought of as a jokester  
With no thoughts or deeper feelings  
But I feel like I can be myself with you  
Let me show you  
This city  
But also me  
The true unfiltered version of me

Paris  
Full of magic  
But also darkness  
Let me show you

I like you  
Even though I can't understand you  
And you can't understand me  
I find you charming  
Beautiful  
Lovely

\*\*\*

Walking with a man  
Losing track of time  
Sun dropping low  
Dark creeping in

People all around  
Talking, laughing, loving, living  
But  
I stand here with a man  
And we speak a language  
Just the two of us

We stand here alone  
Surrounded by France  
A city of love  
Of romance

Will we see each other  
What's next  
I go my way and you go yours  
Or is there more  
To us

Is this a chance  
To not feel empty anymore  
To live  
To be happy  
To know what love is like  
To rely on someone  
To catch you when you fall  
To pick you up when you trip  
To trust

To trust that he wants you  
For who you are  
Not because of any obligations  
Or any ties  
But because he likes you  
No caveats  
Or catches  
Just you and him

This may be a chance for something more  
Or it may not be  
But we will stand here  
In this moment  
Not worrying about what's next  
Or what may come to be  
Not focusing on what's next  
Or what's past

Just here  
Together  
Speaking a language that only we can understand

# WHERE'D ALL THE TIME GO?

By Sophia Arredondo

Inspired by Dr. Dog's  
"Where'd All the Time Go?"



It's the last night of summer  
Before a new chapter begins,  
For a group of childhood friends  
Who aren't ready for the end.

They sit around a bonfire  
With a flame so bright and warm,  
Sad smiles travel around  
As they reminisce on the joyous memories of the past.

After spending their whole lives together,  
Going through the good and bad,  
It all changes tomorrow,  
With their college lives ahead.

Where'd all the time go?

They met at the age of five  
On the first day of school.  
In that moment of new beginnings,  
It was clear their friendship would never die.

They spent elementary school together  
Creating memories that would last forever,  
And they had no idea how they survived  
The ups and downs of their middle school lives.

High school was the best time for the group,  
Every second of their four years was worth it all.  
They were genuinely happy, living in their youth  
Making the most of it, having it feel like a ball.

Where'd all the time go?  
One last summer for the close knit friends,  
Meant to be spent like no other.  
Not a dull day, nor a dead night,  
The sound of laughter and joy filling everyone's heads.

But time doesn't stand still.  
Not for them,  
Not for anyone.  
And nothing stays the same.

Where'd all the time go?

They all want more time.  
It feels too soon to let go.  
One blink, and everything's changed.  
They're all scared to continue to grow.

Where'd all the time go?

Back to reality, and time's running out.  
The bonfire they had lit so long ago is losing its might.  
The warm toned flame is dim,  
Its faint energy radiating towards the group sitting around it.

Everyone knows they can't stay here forever,  
But they haven't been able to accept it yet.  
The inseparable friends had avoided thinking about this night.  
Without each other, what are they to do?

Last goodbyes.  
They're supposed to be easy, aren't they?  
But why does something so pure have to come to an end?  
The fire's gone out now.  
And the teens have all gone their separate ways.

Where'd all the time go?



A stylized sun graphic consisting of two overlapping semi-circles. The top semi-circle is a lighter orange, and the bottom semi-circle is a darker, more vibrant orange. The sun is positioned in the upper half of the page.

*ART*



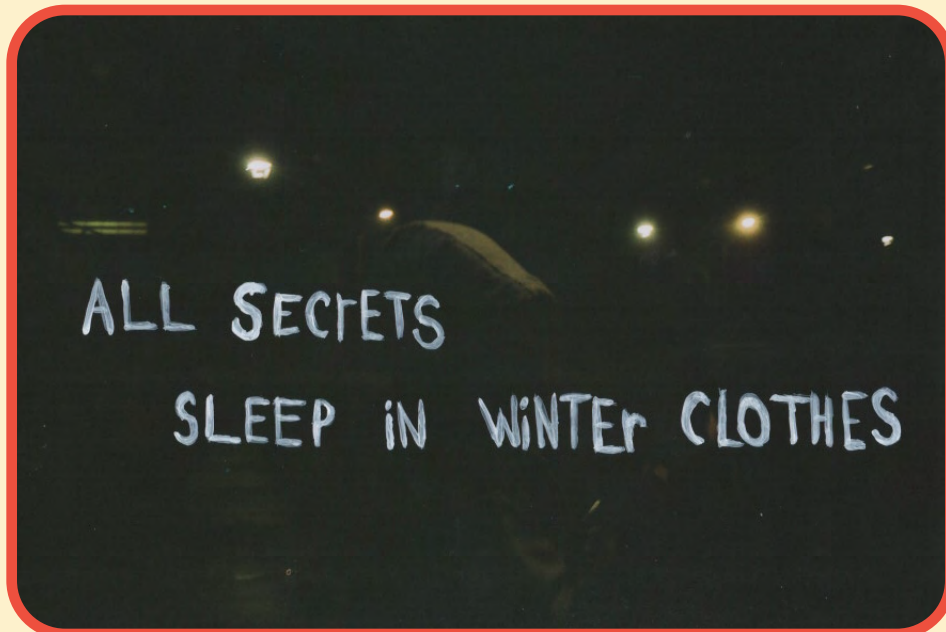
*By Alexander Hunt*

Inspired by Seal's "Kiss from a Rose"





WHAT A BEAUTIFUL FACE  
I HAVE FOUND IN THIS PLACE



ALL SECRETS  
SLEEP IN WINTER CLOTHES

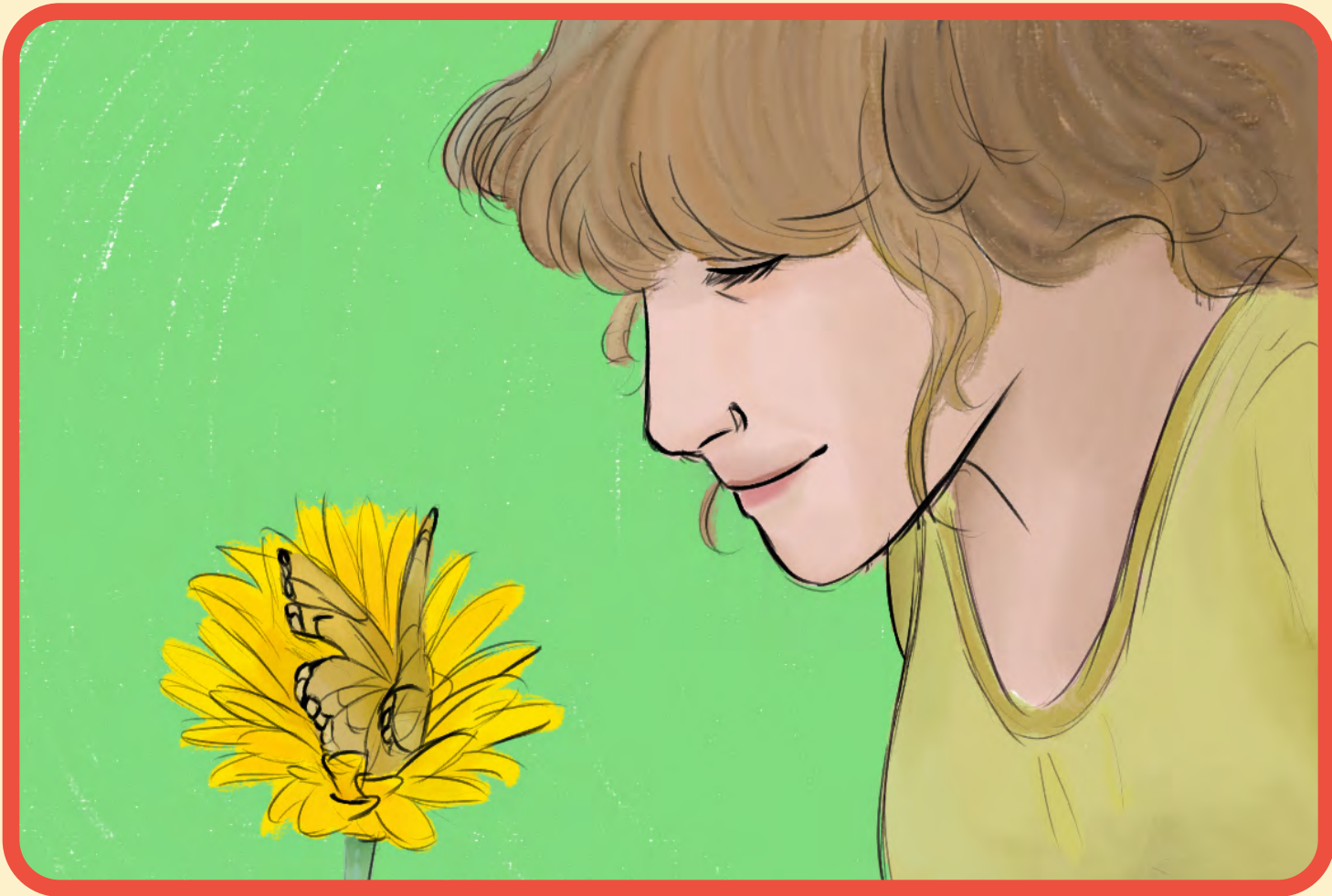


CAN'T BELIEVE  
HOW  
STRANGE  
IT IS TO BE  
ANYTHING  
AT ALL.

By Julia Hamdi

Inspired by Neutral Milk Hotels'  
"In the Aeroplane Over the Sea"





*By Lydia McGuigan*

Inspired by Voyou's "Papillon"



*PROSE*

# INTO THE WEST

By Fazal Naqvi

Inspired by Annie Lennox and  
Howard Shore's "Into the West"



The sparrows sang in the distance, each song resonating together in the sweetest harmony. The deer were galloping across the fallen leaves of the passing autumn. Each beam of sunlight illuminated the exposed blades of grass. The trees stood tall with beautiful white leaves, the branches stretching out like an arm reaching for a fruit. There was a glamorously paved road, as white as marble, and with traces of gold. The path led to a harbor. At the harbor, beautiful ships of white and gold were lined up, ready to set sail. Together, they resembled a flock of gulls, at the edge of a lake.

One particular ship was getting ready to sail across the sea, into the west. It was a gray ship, commonly regarded as one of mankind's greatest creations, a work of art; many questioned if mankind was capable of creating something as beautiful as the ship. What the people didn't know was that the ship did not intend on returning, its journey was coming to an end. This ship had witnessed various accounts throughout its existence: many as dark as a shadow, and others as glamorous as the far-off horizon. It was nearing the end, as it could no longer withstand the troubles of the world. It was sailing across the sea, into the neverending horizon, never to be seen again.

Although no one knew of the intent of the ship, there was a feeling of sorrow that overtook those who laid their eyes on it. As it was leaving, the sparrows began to sing again, and the sun began to set, leaving a heavenly horizon on the western front. The gulls took flight towards the horizon, following the ship, giving their regards and farewells. The sun disappeared, and along with it, a pale white moon had risen, giving notice that the ship was gone forever.



# FOLKLORE - THE LOVE TRIANGLE

By Hayley Villani

## Part One: Betty's POV

Inspired by Taylor Swift's "cardigan"



*"When you are young they assume you know nothing."*

I knew James. James was my first love. James was very different from me, but he understood me. He never fit in with my crowd, but that's what I loved about him. He never tried to be something he wasn't. None of my friends liked him that much, but he was the one person I knew I could depend on. He made me feel safe when the rest of the world neglected me. He would bring me downtown, and he taught me how to love my imperfections. He loved me for me, but he was scared; I knew he was scared. What do people do when they're scared? They run. James needed a way out. I knew he couldn't just leave me—he loved me too much. When Inez told me that he was cheating on me, I wasn't surprised. I knew he would cheat on me, and I knew it would hurt. I knew I would hate him, but I knew he needed to escape for the summer. This wouldn't be permanent. If *he* knew anything, it was that he loved me. I knew he would realize this soon enough. He was making a mistake. The girl he would sneak out with was everything I'm not. She was adventurous and exciting and new. She was all he needed to prove to him that his place was with me. I knew the thrill would be short lived, and I knew he would miss me. I knew he'd come back. I knew everything, so it didn't come as a surprise to me when he showed up at my party.

## Part Two: James' POV

Inspired by Taylor Swift's "betty"



*"I'm only seventeen, I don't know anything."*

Betty switched her homeroom just days after Inez caught me behind the mall with another girl. I don't know how I could be so stupid. Betty was my first love, but I was scared. She loved me so much, but we were so different. She was friends with all the popular kids, and I hate crowds. I always tried for her though. She wasn't the typical popular girl. She understood me, and she loved me for who I was. I saw a side of her that she never showed anyone else. I was there for her when nobody else was, but I abandoned her. I was scared that she trusted me so much. Nobody has ever loved me the way Betty did. I needed to escape before I messed things up. I met Augustine behind the mall one day. She was nothing like Betty. I don't know why I got in the car with her that first day. I don't know why I kept going back. I don't know why I spent all summer going back to Augustine. Maybe she made me feel free, but she didn't love me like Betty. And I didn't love her. I didn't want to love her. She was just a summer thing. A temporary escape. She made me realize why I needed to go back to Betty. I loved Betty. I loved everything about Betty—even that old cardigan that she always wore. Augustine was a mistake. How was I supposed to know any better? I'm only seventeen. This is the worst thing I've ever done. I never wanted to hurt Betty. As I walk home on the broken cobblestone road, I can only hope that she'll forgive me. I don't like her friends, and I hate crowds. But I really messed up this time. So I showed up at her party.

### Part Three: Augustine's POV

Inspired by Taylor Swift's "august"



*"You weren't mine to lose."*

The month was August. I was looking for something exciting and adventurous. What could be more exciting than summer love? That's what James was to me: summer love. When we first started meeting up behind the mall, that was all I needed. As our thing progressed, I found myself waiting for him day after day. I hoped that he would show up behind the mall to get in my car, and most days he did. In August that was all I lived for. *He* was all I lived for. James was different. A part of me felt bad; he was dating Betty. I'm the girl that he was cheating on her with. The other part of me loved him like he was mine. Betty was just another popular girl. I showed him a different side of life— the side of life that James needed to see. But he wasn't mine. He was never mine. The memories we made in August quickly slipped away as the month turned into September. He came to the mall less and less, until he just stopped coming altogether. This shouldn't hurt, but it does. I know it's wrong to have wanted him as my own, but I couldn't help it. He made me feel things I've never felt before. But he was Betty's. He would always be Betty's. I didn't lose him because he wasn't mine to lose in the first place. Sometimes I wish things could have ended differently, but I knew that James would eventually go back to Betty. I gave his life some excitement, but Betty was where his heart belonged. I was disappointed and upset, but I understood why James stopped meeting me behind the mall. Instead, he showed up at her party.



# GIVES YOU HELL

Inspired by The All-American Rejects'  
"Gives You Hell"



By Jack Montoya

Evan's morning began with eight blissful hours of uninterrupted sleep, hair that decided to stay down without a wrestling match, and the anticipation of tonight's big game. His reflection beamed back at him in the mirror. He was flying, and nothing could pull him back down to Earth.

That is, until he met her fiery eyes, halfway down the hall, hidden by hundreds of backpacks and chatting students. Evan looked down at his feet, focusing on avoiding the cracks between the tiles. He chanced another glance up. This time, Evan and Lucy locked eyes. He faked a smile— she did not. Whether she caught him staring or he caught her, Evan wasn't sure. He was sure, however, that his likelihood of a heavenly day was instantly nosediving.

"You'd think she'd cut through a different hallway now," Evan exclaimed, hastening himself to catch up to his friend, Raf. "She probably expected *you* to go another way," remarked Raf as they turned the corner. "Pssh, I'm not going to change my route because of her," Evan laughed. "Just don't let Lucy get in your head, you know, with our playoff game tonight."

Evan knew that Raf was right. Lucy was a master manipulator—a lying, conniving, mischievous nightmare from hell, who disguised herself as a compassionate girlfriend for six wasteful months of Evan's life. He couldn't allow her to drill into his brain and hijack his mind again. Evan had no doubt that she would stoop to the depths of jealousy and deceit in order to make him suffer.

Sure enough, Evan found a wall of girls damming the hallway later that morning. He easily discerned Lucy's voice echoing off the corridor's brick walls and tile floors. Half-listening to her purposefully loud conversation, Evan caught a few phrases through Lucy's fabricated smile, including the names of multiple "hot guys" she claimed to be talking to. Her attempts to make him jealous were pathetic, Evan thought, grinning. Lucy's face scrunched when she noticed him smiling; clearly this was not the reaction she had hoped for. He felt the blue flames in her eyes attempting to scorch the back of his head as he walked past.

The final bell of the day blared, and Evan met Raf heading toward the gym. "I saw Lucy last period," Raf lowered his eyebrows and tightened his lips in imitation, "She looked furious." "That's because I don't," Evan laughed as the two boys strode into the locker room.

As game time approached, students flowed into the bleachers until a sea of faces sat peering down at the empty court. Evan and his teammates jogged into the gym and the stands exploded; a combination of cheers, whistles, and applause rumbled through the air. The crowd's echo slowly faded as the players took their positions and the ref whistled for the start of the game.

By the fourth quarter, Evan's team was down by a few points. Evan—having just been fouled—had the opportunity to tie the game if he made both shots. He glanced into the bleachers, searching for his cheering friends among the blur of faces. His eyes scanned the rows until finally pausing on a cold, fiery gaze piercing right through him.

Lucy, absolutely delighted to catch Evan's attention, threw her arms around the confused, good-looking boy to her left. Evan, refusing to be flustered, gave her a smirk that said, "Really, that's the best you can do?" He turned back to the basket, drew in a long breath, and swished the first shot. Splash.

The stands roared. Evan's gaze fell back on Lucy. He could see her face burning red hot. She paused, then, without warning, pulled the boy next to her and pressed her mouth onto his, not once taking her eyes off of Evan's. Evan simply shrugged, sank the second shot, and beamed up at Lucy, her livid face drowning in the multitude of cheering spectators.

# HURT

By Jenna Levine

Inspired by Johnny Cash's  
"Hurt"



I hurt myself today, to make sure it's all still real. Of course it is, I knew that already, but focusing on my own pain makes me feel better. Though I'm not sure if that makes sense. My pain reminds me of how much I'm hurting everyone else. Sure that makes me feel awful, but it helps because I know I can never rationalize forgiving myself for everything I've done and everything I'm doing.

Nearly every Friday a new needle tears a fresh hole in my skin and I feel the sting that's become all too familiar. I try to forget, but every time the memories flood my brain. The new thoughts and feelings soak into the old thoughts, feelings, *and* memories. They bleed together and I'm left with the regret of everything I've done wrong.

It makes me think about my family. My beautiful children, I owe them the world. I know that in the end, all I'll ever do is hurt them. Maybe that's why I decided to keep the truth from them. For now they don't have to worry about anything. I don't want them to worry about the future, or about me. In the end, they'll blame me for not telling them everything. No matter what I do I'll end up hurting them. There's no escape from their hatred. Everyday that goes by, everyday that I don't tell them what's going on, is *hurting* them.

I never miss a day of work, it's my escape. But, while I'm at work, I remind myself of everything that's left to do. Everything I have to set up for when I'm gone. In the end when I leave, this empire of dirt, I built with my own father, will be left to my love. It seems impressive, my dirt, but it doesn't matter what I do and don't have, cause in the end we're left with nothing.

My wife, the love of my life. She's going to be left to fend for, and take care of our children all alone. My children will grow without a father, and it's all my fault. I'm *not* making it easy for them. Even after all the preparations, all the planning, it'll never be enough, because what I really need is *time*. I'm running out of time, and it's the only thing I *know* I need.

I wear a crown of thorns, but it's not a sign of luck, or a sign of honor, or sacrifice. No, the thorns dig into my skin, into my skull, and remind me of the lies I'm telling everyone. I'm the king of taking away from my children, my wife, my friends. Everyone.

If I could start again, I would. I would change everything, do it all differently. I'd live miles away from where I first started, I wouldn't lie or disappoint, I wouldn't be dying at forty, I would live and raise my kids right.

It doesn't matter anymore, because what's done is done. One day, probably soon, I'll lay down, close my eyes, slow my breath, and never see this world again. I'll never walk again, never talk again. I'll never see my children or wife, I'll never love again. It'll be over soon, very soon.



By Jordana Schweitzer

Thank God! It's Friday. Totally not mentally suffering out there. Totally not in a perpetual down spiral. It hurts when I see her in the hallway and my heart pangs with longing. It hurts when I get so close and they don't feel a thing. I always find myself laying down on my bed, facing the ceiling, pondering where it all went wrong.

Why is the world so pointedly opinionated? It hurts. No physical pain, just dark, overpowering thoughts that make my palms break out in a sweat. There's also certain lingering, persistent emotions I can't shove out of my brain. My head is always a mess, and I feel like I can't do anything no matter how hard I try.

I want to work towards something, but there's nothing to work towards. I end up becoming petty, bitter, and useless—all of the traits considered undesirable in our society. But that realization just lets my emotions consume me even more. I don't seem to understand the concept of being alone and afraid. I feel like I am running up a treadmill that keeps pushing me down, and no matter how hard I try... it just keeps pushing me down.

It's the weekend now. I don't know what to say—dreams are overpowering sometimes *huh?* I could just sit up in my comfortable bed and not think about reality. But I am someone who reads too deeply into things. This was just a dream, definitely not a cry for help, *right?* Now we were in a conundrum, with no way of getting back to sleep naturally. Being it broad daylight, I would have to come up with a contingency plan to remove myself from reality. Sleeping meds wouldn't work—the cabinets were under lock and key for a reason. Guess daydreaming would have to suffice.

I laid down in bed facing upwards and let my eyes droop closed. I wish I could stay like this forever, prone to the hard physical gravity of the atmosphere pressing down from above. It was a dark, stormy night. No wait—it was an overpowering, odious morning. The sky was tediously lit up with stars. *It doesn't make much sense for it to be broad daylight, you say?* Well I'm about to turn all perspectives of reality upside down.

But circumventing thoughts is not my specialty, so I suppose an ultimatum is in order. You will either understand, or you won't, with the environment in retrospect.

There's a ship in a harbor, with drops of influential paint in a bucket, botched with the urge to splatter sorrows instead of paint; hurt. One takes all of these factoids and allows them to seep in your brain. They take over your thoughts and catalyze the mind. It's a catapult of reality, syncopated into an unruly beat.

I sit stock straight in the bed, panting. This wasn't making me feel any better. I guess the one good thing about hitting your own personal rock bottom is that everything else following your experiences has to improve. Only going up from here is a comforting thought indeed.

I slid off my bed and burst through the door of my house. I was in such a frenzy that my shoes were haphazardly placed on my feet. I didn't really care much though. Walking always helped clear my head. When I get home from school feeling bitter and alone, feeling rundown and downtrodden, I go out. Things make sense with the hard pavement beneath my feet.

I'm not sure how long I walked for, only my legs were burning and my eyes were streaming with tears from the biting cold wind. Decidedly taking a break, I opened my water bottle and took a large swig. Walking made me realize how insignificant all of my problems were in the grand scheme of things. It was time to allow myself to move on. My body wanted to, now it was time for my mind to gain some brevity.

The walk home wasn't nearly as thoughtful as the walk there. It hurts to be so in love— was it even love in the first place? Or just a one sided attraction that I had stoked in my head for way too long.

Anyway, do you remember an aspect of life that seems so catastrophic it couldn't be real? That is where the inherent bias I mentioned earlier comes from. In the event of some disaster or emergency, people would be all over it. When it comes to the quiet loneliness and self torment of a girl searching for love in all the wrong places, many will turn a blind eye.

This Friday night, I'll end up doing this whole song and dance again. It was a wild ride but I cannot perceive myself going forward and pursuing something I will not be able to change.

# MEANINGLESS

Inspired by Pink Floyd's  
"Summer '68"



By Joe Finn

I wasn't supposed to feel anything, it was all meaningless, the entire experience. It happened many times before. Always the same story, we'd perform onstage, some groupies would come backstage with us— you get the idea.

I don't want to say I do it frequently, but every once in a while I indulge myself. The same emotionally meaningless experience, over and over again; something that's supposed to be a moment of pleasure then letting the memory seep so far to the back of my mind that I completely forget about it.

So, why can't I do this with her? Out of all of these encounters, why *her*? The whole affair was relatively uneventful, nothing about it really stood out to me. Things happened, sure, but then it was over. We said our goodbyes before either of us could form some kind of emotional attachment, so I thought. It was, after all, completely meaningless.

It wasn't wrong for me to do something like this, right? Every famous musician does it. It's basically become a part of the job. Everyone else is doing it, you see it in the newspapers all the time. It's meaningless, or that's what it should be.

I don't know where all of these thoughts are coming from. Why now, why this woman? Why, no matter how hard I try, can't I cleanse my mind of her?

Wait. Meaningless. Is that really my excuse? *Wow!*

It was all for nothing. It was pointless, and empty. The tiny bit of pleasure I might have gained is canceled out because I've lost far more than I've gotten. I lost my dignity, my reputation. Why did I do it? My brain can't take it anymore.

I just wish I knew how she feels about it all.

# LA SEINE

By Madelyn Serxner

Inspired by Vanessa Paradis'  
"La Seine"



My mind is hollow, being continuously emptied by the air, the crisp, cool air. Oh, how it dances around me, tickling my thoughts, grasping my attention with a tight grip.

My feet feel light upon the soft, green grass, how each strand lays, intertwined between them, a childlike feeling I want to last forever. The river, how it calls my name, a soft whisper enchanting me, pulling me, and I am trapped. My body is a limp husk and my mind wanders somewhere

Far     far     away.

I yearn for the warm mist, kissed on my soft forehead. Each worry dissolves into the infinite universe. My mind becomes at ease. I blame the river, for it is the reason for my captivity, my enchantment, my mind being silenced. La Seine, I can not get enough.

La Seine, the words fall off my tongue, the sweet, sweet words. Warmth trickles up my arms and dances down to my feet, I feel the moon's gaze. It's white light, cleansing the worries which fill me.

La seine, oh how much I love you. I reach out,

so     so     far,

longing to feel this intangible love, but all I grasp is silent, breathless air. So pretty she is, La Seine. effortless, as she sparkles, aided by the moon's infantile light. I do not want to share.

My fingers instantly feel lighter and start to tingle. Suddenly, I am as light as the air. I float to the stars. Each one smiling as I swiftly pass by. I waved to one of them, delighted by its beauty, and they twinkled in worship of me. My eyelids slowly closed, when they opened I saw a bright slide made from the combination of the stars.

Gently, I slid down it being lured back to the lake, like a fish being reeled on a line. I am trapped in their beauty and entangled by their wispers.. I have to go home, La Seine. Let me say

goodbye.

# THE UNSPOKEN TRUTH ABOUT HONESTY

Inspired by  
Billy Joel's "Honesty"



By Madison Maida

Honesty. How important is it to you? What *is* it to you? As some people argue, it is one of the most admirable qualities within a person—a quality that puts that person above everyone else. However, in this day and age, it is hard to find this quality around us. Our world is filled with intentionally misleading information, lies to save one's back, and so much more. One could easily argue that our society's lack of honesty is our biggest weakness as humans.

Billy Joel, an extraordinarily famous singer and songwriter, expresses his thoughts on this important issue through his song "Honesty." The song's lyrics, along with its melancholy tone, really makes listeners contemplate the significance of honesty. "Honesty is such a lonely word, everyone is so untrue." This line alone gives the listener the opportunity to recognize the absence of honesty and truthfulness in our world. It makes us question ourselves on how honest we are, and how one of the most important characteristics within a functioning relationship and a working community has been lost.

Music contains the power of speaking to people's minds, hearts, and souls. The meaning of a song is amplified when it speaks to all three at once. Joel's "Honesty" speaks to his audience's minds by making them reflect on the importance of honesty. The song speaks to their hearts by reminding them of all the times people have lied to them, regardless of the intentions, and what impact such dishonesty has had on them. Lastly, the song speaks to their souls by making them question their own honesty, both with themselves and with others.

Joel's song might remind us of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Throughout the novel, the protagonist Holden Caulfield frequently calls everyone phonies, liars, and fakers. He sees the world as a fraud. What's ironic, however, is that Holden is an unreliable narrator as well. Everyone, including Holden, is a phony, liar, and faker. Just like "Honesty," the novel truly makes us question how sincere our world is.

So, take a look around yourself. How honest are the people you spend your days with? How honest are you with them? And how honest are you with yourself? How *important* is honesty to you?



# WORDS

Inspired by Gregory Alan Isakov's  
"Words"



By Regina Martinez

Crumpled paper on the floor. Over and over, scrapping a thought, tossing a sorry punchline. It's so hard writing to you like this. I'm not sure if I'm being too serious or too nonchalant. I'm not sure if you'll read my words the way they're meant to be read.

There are miles and hours and moon phases between us. Maybe in your world, my old jokes don't land the same. Maybe the time zone changed your sense of humor.

I wish I knew that our meeting at that party would be the last time I'd see you. I would've complimented your dress. I really thought it was pretty. I would've mustered up an ounce of courage and sat a little closer to you. I would've asked if you were cold, would've given you my jacket.

There's not much I can say now. Your mind's made up and so is my bed. You don't wrinkle the sheets anymore. You started wanting to mess up your own. And that's all good as long as you sleep soundly. I'm fine knowing that we're looking at the same moon, separated by the same oceans, keeping the same memories.

If I send this letter, don't be alarmed by my reappearance in your life. I just needed to tell you that I should've complimented your dress. I should've given you my jacket. I'd cross oceans to do it now.

# CAVING

By Riley Grimes

Inspired by Matt Maltese's  
"As The World Caves In"



The headline of the paper resonates in my head as I stare blankly at my collection of empty beer bottles. I've thought about this day many times, but I never imagined it actually happening.

It can't be happening.

I feel sweat sprouting from the pores on my forehead as I try to deny reality. Panic slowly starts to fill the crevices of my mind, clouding my thoughts. I pick up the newspaper again, hoping that when I look at it this time the article will have changed. Unfortunately, I was not so lucky. The bold red letters still sit firmly at the top of the page. The knot in my stomach tightens, strangling me.

It can't be happening.

My anxiety starts to turn to nausea, or maybe it's the beer, I can't tell. I need to lay down. I need her. I stumble through the hallway, and I hear the TV faintly from my room.

"THIS IS NOT A TEST. THIS IS NOT A TEST. THIS IS N-"

The volume of the TV shuts off, though I can still hear the robotic voice repeating the same message over, and over, and over again. I'm gripping onto my head. I'm still, yet the room around me is moving. I need to be grounded.

She's laying on the bed staring at the TV, watching the time we have together shrink gradually. I sit next to her and rest my head on her shoulder. The room slows to a stop.

I'm with her.

I close my eyes. I feel her warmth fill my body, releasing the strangling knot around my stomach. My tremors cease. I can hear her breathing, steady. I reach for her hand and she grasps mine. I unite my sweaty hand with hers; it's soft, delicate.

I'm with her.

I feel the room shake, except this time it's not in my mind. Her grip tightens around my hand. I place my hand on top of hers as the world quakes.

"I'm with you," I whisper.

"I'm with you."

# SUNSET

Inspired by Johnny Cash's  
"You Are My Sunshine"



*By Samantha Cardarelli*

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine away."

Some of their happiest memories were associated with that song. He sang it to her in her cradle, when he tucked her into bed, and at her many birthday parties. But alas no longer.

She wished he would sing it to her at graduation and prom, and the many milestones to come, but unfortunately the sun had set. Her sunshine had been taken away. Now she sang alone as the sun slowly set, marking the end of yet another day without her sunshine.

# BEING ALIVE

By Samantha Rodriguez

I had lived by myself for almost as long as I could remember; Even back in my early days, when my parents had had the displeasure of being forced to help me survive, they hadn't talked to me much. It hadn't felt like we lived together, so much as that we had both occupied the same space at different times.

My mother worked almost everyday except Sundays, on which she would drag me out of bed and force us to spend our only time together at the local church. I hadn't liked religion much back then, and my mother would often preach to me. I remembered late nights spent listening to her off-the-cuff sermons after church, trying to retain the information, to have faith like she did. I remembered thinking she was a stupid woman, but whenever I recall my mother now, I can only think how much she cared about me, about how it was all for nothing.

My father used to work night shifts at the hospital. He wasn't a doctor—he was a receptionist—but he liked to pretend. I remembered early mornings, before I went to school, when he'd tell me the most grotesque things he'd seen that night. I used to hate him for it; he always said *his* patients, like he was helping. I suppose he was helping them, in some ways.

I don't know; it doesn't matter, anyway. I lost contact with both of my parents a while ago, back when I started living alone. Neither of them had taken well to it; my mother had bought me a new cell phone and blocked her number off of it, as a going-away present.

I live in an apartment on the second floor of a building that's only a few blocks away from my job. I work as a cashier at a local gas station, which is quite possibly one of the most boring jobs a man can have these days. I spend a lot of my time at work standing around and pretending to do things, which is really half of what working as a cashier is nowadays.

I have two good friends named Sandy and Melford who got engaged a few years back, they live down in the suburbs, in a house they bought around the same time they got engaged. They've been engaged for a while now, and I keep asking them about the wedding, but whenever I ask Sandy starts twisting her engagement ring on her finger and Melford starts stumbling through his words, so I'm guessing it's not happening anytime soon. Truthfully I don't care too much about the wedding, but I still ask sometimes out of common courtesy.

I don't think Sandy and Melford will ever get married. They're always talking about each other like they're in love, but their house is already split like they've divorced. Sandy lives on the second floor of the house and Mel lives on the first. I think most of what they do is just to keep up appearances.

Sandy asked me yesterday about living alone. She said something like: "Why aren't you scared?" And I thought to myself, *why should I be scared? You're alone, too, Sandy, you're just lying to yourself with that ring and the house and Melford.* I thought that, but I didn't say anything. I just kind of stared at Sandy until she got this look on her face like she was pissed at me for not saying anything.

Then I said, "The truth is I am scared, Sandy, but I try not to think about it." That's not true, of course, but I said it anyway, because I think it's how Sandy feels. She likes having her thoughts echoed back to her.

“You should start thinking about it,” Sandy said, twisting the ring on her finger like she does. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to, but you shouldn’t spend your whole life alone.”

I asked her why she and Melford hadn’t gotten married and she scrunched up her face at me, and I could see all the wrinkles on her face for a second, wrinkles that hadn’t been there the first time she’d told me about the engagement, and it made me suddenly scared of being alone for the first time. I pocketed the feeling and looked away from her, and I made up some excuse about having a meeting or something, and I could tell she didn’t believe me, but she still let me go. I was glad for that.

# ARE WE STILL FRIENDS?

Inspire by Tyler, the Creator's  
"ARE WE STILL FRIENDS?"



By Sophia Deja

We were once *strangers*. Before looking back, I never realized how much you've impacted my life. We went from not even knowing each other's names, to you being a main characters in my life story.

You were like the sun, you shined above everyone else. Your little rays of happiness were contagious, constantly filling me with joy. Your ecstatic energy pulled me in, it was almost as if our friendship was meant to be, so we became friends.

We would talk everyday, non-stop. Our laughter filled the air and turned a cold winter's wind into a warm summer breeze. We were inseparable. We were best friends.

We'd sit in my room. Your bright smile filled every crevice of my dark room with a light that was brighter than the sun. We'd talk for hours, but sometimes we'd sit there without saying a word, yet we were still communicating. There was an unspoken understanding between us.

So what happened?

I guess we grew up. We went our separate ways. I didn't mean for it to end without a goodbye. We were as close as friends could be, how could things end up so wrong? We were slowly growing more distant, but it was fine, because we were friends, *right*? It didn't matter if we didn't talk everyday, or every week, or ever...

I remember thinking to myself, questioning if we were still friends. Next thing you know, we stop looking for each other in the school halls. I knew it was over. My mind swelled with darkness, becoming a cold void of nothingness. I was helpless. There was nothing I could do to fix what once was.

We stopped hanging out, stopped calling, and texting. I knew we were no longer friends. Instead, we were strangers again. Strangers with memories...

# TALK TO ME

Inspire by Cavetown's  
"Talk to Me"



By Jenna Levine

I remember it clearly, the night I found out she wasn't OK. She was fine that day at school, she seemed normal, I daresay, happy. Although I know she always pretended to be OK; if you asked her she was *always* fine.

Even on her bad days it was hard to pick up on the signs unless you were really looking. She'd have a bit of an attitude, but she'd pull it off as just goofing around, like a sarcastic kind of attitude. If you looked at her fingers, her cuticles were probably bleeding. She'd tear them to bits, picking until there was nothing left. Her lips would look like they were badly chapped when in reality, she was picking and peeling them as well.

I didn't realize it, but she called me. I was doing something, something I just *know* was nowhere near more important than responding to her phone call. When I checked my phone, I saw the missed call notification, it reached from the phone and stabbed me right in the heart; she was never one to randomly call. Even though we were close, she preferred talking in person if it wasn't something serious.

I didn't hesitate to call her back, but she didn't pick up, and that's when my anxiety got the better of me. I texted her; I'll never forget those texts. I sat there just staring, waiting to see when she read the messages.

*I'm here if you  
need. Please talk to me.*

*We can talk on the phone, or  
if you prefer, you can always come  
here. Or I can come to you.*

She didn't respond as fast as she usually does. I must have reread my messages hundreds of times. I thought the worst. I didn't know what to do with myself. I wasn't sure if I should go to her house, or if it was better to wait for a response. So I sat there, glued to the floor I was standing on, paralyzed.

In my mind I waited for years, though I know from the message timestamp it was a mere three minutes that I was standing there waiting for her message.

*I'm coming over.*

A simple response that most days wouldn't satisfy me at all, gave such an exceedingly large amount of relief. It was a lifeboat for a drowning person. It saved me from the ocean of thoughts that pulled at my lungs, keeping me from breathing and staying afloat.

But now I was faced with a longer, far more excruciating wait. Twiddling my thumbs uselessly, waiting for her to get to my house. The anticipation reached out with its scraggly fingers and wrapped around my neck, choking me.

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It was a good thing I stood by the door, or else I never would have heard her light, soft tapping. As soon as I opened the door a pool of tears filled her eyes, and she collapsed in my arms. We fell to the floor, and sat there for a while. I could feel her heavy breath, the kind that only happens when someone's crying.

"Talk to me," I said looking down at her, gently brushing my hands through her messy hair. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," she responded through sniffles.

"That's OK, you don't have to know what to say or what to think," I reassured her, trying my best not to cry, or show how worried I was; I knew my worry would make her feel worse.

"I don't know if I can do it anymore..." she said, trailing off, carefully thinking about what to say next. "I can't—I just don't know how—" she stopped and fell silent for a while. Her heavy breath turned into a nearly silent wind; she was starting to relax. The tense in her shoulders released and she let herself go for a moment.

"Why don't you come inside, or we can stay on the floor if you prefer." I offered, trying to break the quiet, and provide a tiny bit of comfort. I wasn't sure what I was doing. I convinced myself I was saying the complete opposite of what she needed to hear, but she was going along with everything thus far, so I guessed it was safe to assume it wasn't *all* wrong.

"You have water?" She looked up at me and started to straighten herself out.

"Y-yeah, I do," I said, with nervousness clearly pronounced in my words. I was balancing a scale, one wrong move and everything fell apart. I could tell she was worried, but in my mind I was telling myself everything was good. She was right where she needed to be. So I got up off the floor and closed the front door, shielding us from the nighttime frost. I walked to the kitchen and reached for a cup from the cupboard. Then I walked to the fridge. I could hear her feet shuffling down the hall while she made her way to the kitchen.

I filled the cup with ice and water and handed it to her while she sat on one of the stools at the center island.

"Here," I said softly while handing her the cup.

"Thank you," she replied quietly.

"Are you ready to talk?" She looked at her hands. I knew she was thinking about picking at her fingers. She'd done that for as long as I can remember. It was going to take a lot for her to share what she was feeling. She was never one to talk about her life or her problems. She preferred to listen; she liked to focus on other people's lives so she didn't have to worry about her own.

"I don't know where to start..." she almost whispered. I could tell she was exhausted. She never got much sleep, but some nights were worse than others.

"You haven't been sleeping?" She looked in my eyes, her own widened. I got it right. She nodded her head. "You're having the dreams again?"

"Yeah." She let out a heavy sigh. A while ago she told me about these recurring dreams that started off peacefully, then the haunting thoughts she had during the day would crawl their way in, taking over her dreams to turn them into nightmares. It took a lot out of her. She would sleep for a measly couple of



hours each night. Something she claimed was enough to keep her going. In reality, it wasn't a sufficient amount for anyone.

"You've really gotta work on getting more sleep. I know it'll make you feel better. Don't let the nightmares control you." I felt awful for thinking it, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking I was giving the wrong advice. Though, I knew I couldn't go back on what I was saying; there was no way she would consider my words if I wasn't confident in what I was telling her.

"I can't continue to be the person everyone thinks I am." She said, changing the topic, "I feel like my life is a glass pane that's slipping out of my hands. The pieces are on the floor, shattered. I don't think I can pick them up." She drew in a breath, looked in my eyes for a moment, then back down at her hands.

"I'll help you pick up the pieces." She smiled softly, still looking at her hands. "Can you tell me about the dreams?" She let out a tired sigh. She had thought she'd successfully turned the conversation away from the dreams. I felt miserable for making her talk about it, I knew it was something she could not stand to explain. Yet, here I was forcing her to. Can I even consider myself a good friend? Yes, I am. I was trying to help her, and I couldn't help unless I knew exactly what was going on. "Talk to me..."

"Alright..." she started after a while, "I don't really know what happens in the dreams, but when I wake up, I feel—" she paused, thinking carefully about her words. "I feel numb, but not the pins and needles kind, no. For me, it's just emptiness, a void of nothing." She stopped to look at my expression, to gauge what I was thinking. She did this all the time, and she was pretty good at reading me. I kept my face blank as possible, simultaneously fighting off her worry and my own. "I just feel so alone, like I'm so insignificant, and no one loves me, no one cares about me. I'm just *alone*." I looked at her for a minute while I formulated the right response.

"You're not alone, that's one thing I can guarantee, cause I'm never leaving you, no matter how hard you try to push me away or try to get rid of me." She chuckled, and on her face formed a bittersweet smile. "And you know, it doesn't make you selfish or narcissistic to love yourself."

"Yeah," she said through a sigh.

"I promise everything will be OK. I know it seems like nothing will be the same, and that it's too hard to see the good beyond *all* the bad, but you have to fight it. You already know that running from your problems doesn't work." I stopped. "You gotta talk to me, OK?"

"I will..." she trailed off, which wasn't very convincing, but I went with it because I knew she was going to be OK.

"Why don't you stay with me tonight." She nodded, and we walked upstairs. I let her sleep in my bed, and I sat next to her. She fell asleep practically immediately, and not too long after, I did as well.

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I woke up that morning feeling satisfied with *everything* I'd told her. I thought things were already getting better, and eventually everything would be OK, just like I told her. But then, I turned to where she was sleeping. The covers were neatly placed back, as if she was never even there.

My heart jumped out of my chest, I could feel a cold sweat writhe through my pores and consume my body. Pure panic completely ingested my mind. I could feel my soul leaving my body, I was an empty shell of a person. I sat back on the bed losing my mind.

When I finally snapped out of it, I scanned my room. On the nightstand to the left of my bed was a bright yellow post-it note with her handwriting on it.

*I'm sorry.*

I'm sorry!?! *Jesus* was all I thought; though I'm not sure whether I said it out loud or just in my head. I ran frantically towards the door, and slammed it behind me. I sprinted as fast as I could to her house, entirely ignoring the bitter air surrounding me.

When I got there I pounded on the front door, slamming my fists in the wood, trying to get someone to let me in. I looked at the driveway and realized her parents weren't home. She was in there all alone. I cursed myself a bunch of times, trying to force myself to think fast. Then I remembered they kept a spare key.

I couldn't remember exactly where they kept it, so I searched around the front porch. The tears in my eyes felt like they were freezing over, my vision blurred. Which made the pursuit for the spare key significantly more difficult.

An eternity passed, and I eventually found the key. I took my trembling hands to the door lock and opened the door. I ran upstairs, and as I made my way to the landing, I found the bathroom door closed and locked.

I was distraught, I felt like giving up. I found myself asking why she was trying so hard to keep someone from helping her. I wanted to lay on the floor and cry. Maybe after that the door would magically open. I slapped myself across the face, how could I let my mind go there? I almost gave up on my *best* friend. What was *wrong* with me?

"Let me in," I screamed. "Let me in," even louder. "Let me in," at the top of my lungs. It felt like they would burst out from inside me. I banged on the door, pushed it, pulled it, but nothing happened.

I tripped over myself while I ran to her bedroom. I went over to the dresser and found an old, bent bobby pin that she had shown me years ago. I knew it had one purpose—unlocking doors. I hurried back to the bathroom and wiggled the bobby pin until I heard the glorious *click* of the door unlocking.

I opened the door, and I found her on the floor unconscious with pills in her hands. My heart dropped, and grief enveloped me for a brief moment. Forcing myself to focus, I grabbed my phone with shaking hands and dialed 911.

"911, what's your emergency?" the phone operator asked.

"Pills," I heard myself breathlessly responding, "she overdosed, please." Not knowing what exactly to tell the operator, I begged, cried, and prayed that there was a God to pray to, that someone would hear me and save her. "God, please help me."

"Help is on the way, don't move." I could hear the phone operator respond. They sounded miles away, and their response echoed in the back of my mind perpetually. I stayed there, holding her lifeless body in my arms, and finally, I heard the sirens growing closer.

They barged through the front door. I remember shouting, "up here, up the stairs, please help me." I felt so unbelievably powerless, so lost. I kept telling myself this wasn't actually happening, that this couldn't be real. I felt the EMT's pushing me out of the way. She was ripped out of my arms. That could've been the last time I ever saw her.

It's a blur after that. I've tried so many times to get myself to look back and figure out what happened. I need to know *everything* that happened. I need to know what I was missing in those series of unfortunate events. What was my mind protecting me from?

I remember walking through the front door, but I have no idea how I got down the stairs. I don't remember leaving the house, or the EMT's picking her up and putting her in the ambulance. I don't remember what they did with her in the bathroom. They asked me a number of questions, none of which I really comprehended. I felt myself nodding. Then I stepped onto the ambulance. The only thing I know for a fact is that her survival was the only thing on my mind.

Everything was loud, but muffled, almost quiet. The sirens vibrated through my bones, and my entire body was shaking.

The ambulance ride is the least clear in my mind. Looking back it doesn't even seem like the drive to the hospital was as long as it really is. When we got to the hospital the EMT's rushed to open the squeaky ambulance doors. When I tried to walk in the building with her, they stopped me. Something about not being family.

Even though I was completely unaware of what was going on around me, I vividly remember a short nurse telling me I couldn't stay. I heard my voice far off, asking if I could sit in the waiting room. I didn't hear or even care about her answer. I floated over towards the chairs and slumped down, nervous and constantly thinking about what would happen if she didn't make it.

Some time passed. Someone walked behind me, and I felt their hand on my shoulder; her parents were finally there. Tears welled up in their eyes, worry was plastered all across their faces. I sat there, not a thought on my mind, no emotions on my face, just a blank canvas waiting for paint, sitting in a chair. Waiting... and waiting... and waiting...

A doctor walked through one of the doors in front of me. He motioned for her parents to walk over. They stood up from beside me awkwardly with tired eyes. They held hands, while they looked hopefully at the doctor, *praying* they got the good news everyone hoped for. I watched as the doctor's mouth moved, but I was unable to decipher what he was saying.

"Ah! Oh my God," her mother exclaimed. Her legs gave out and she collapsed into her husband's arms. He wrapped his hands around his wife's body, keeping her from falling to the floor. Everyone in the room was watching, wondering what the doctor had told them, hoping everything was OK. I felt myself shifting to the edge of my seat. I wanted to walk up to her mother and yell at her. *Just tell me if she's alright, woman!* I couldn't contain myself. I thought I might die on the spot if she had taken any longer to tell me what happened.

"She's alright," her father said, letting out the heaviest sigh of relief. I heard myself cursing again. Finally, I was alleviated of all that weight. The premature grief weighed two tons, and that weight was finally off my shoulders. I still felt like I was miles away and everything was echoing through one ear and drifting out the other. Almost like the news of her safety wasn't real but a mere figment of my imagination. I thought I had let the closest person in my life slip through the cracks. *She's alive*, was all I could think.

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Her parents wouldn't allow me to visit. I think they hated me— or I guess they resented me. Maybe they thought I could have done more to help her.

Even though I wasn't allowed to visit, I still went to the hospital everyday. I sat in the lobby, staring at the blank walls, hoping that one day I'd see her again.

A few days later, however, her parents finally broke our separation. I went the next day as soon as I came home from school. The only thing I could think that day was what I would say to her. I remember how I felt when I made my way toward the elevators. My hands were shaking and sweaty, I could barely contain my nervous excitement. I had no idea how she would react to seeing me after all this time, after everything that happened. I had no idea how *I* would react. What she would say and do, or what I would say and do.

I made my way down the never-ending hallway to her room. When I finally found it, I stood in front of the door, thinking. I still had no idea what I would say to her, but I got over my anxiety, and opened the creaking door. I walked into the small white space. Opposite the door was a large window

looking out onto the parking lot; cars and people bustling about, minding their own business.

She was in bed, staring blankly at the T.V in the corner of the room. She was pale and ghostly, her skin had no shading or any kind of color to it. like she was a husk of her former self.

“Hi,” I said, with a slight smile on my face, attempting to seem happy rather than nervous. I moved closer and sat on the bed next to her. There were tubes in her arms and monitors beeping and flashing all around.

No one likes being in hospitals, I feel particularly anxious and uncomfortable being around one. So many people go in and never come out, and that makes my stomach contort. But none of that mattered because I'd walk across hot coals or jump in front of a train to see her.

“Hey,” she responded with a hoarse voice, she sounded like she hadn't said a word in weeks.

“How are you?” I could hear the pity in my voice and I immediately felt wretched for it. I nervously adjusted myself on her bed, knowing that she hated when people showed any kind of pity or sympathy toward her.

“Oh, you know...” she started. I thought I might have seen something that closely resembled a smile forming across her face, “The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and everything is just peachy.” She looked out the window. My contorting stomach stopped in its tracks, her sarcasm was a breath of fresh air. It felt great! She was almost back to her normal self, and the amount of pure delight that filled me was indescribable.

“So...” I trailed off since I didn't have a plan for a conversation topic, “talk to me,” I said, without even realizing what I was saying. A serious tone consumed the entire room. We both felt the weight of it. She pushed the blankets that covered her legs, and she shifted her body toward me, opening her arms and constricting my bones within her small, yet surprisingly strong, scrawny muscles. Her arms tightened around my shoulders and her head rested on my chest.

Her powerful embrace hit me like a truck. I could feel her body moving, breathing. Suddenly all of our problems drifted away. It was just her and I, nothing else. We were communicating without words and I could tell her future was bright. She had so much ahead of her, she just hadn't seen it yet. But at this moment, everything was alright.

# DEAR WORMWOOD

Inspired by The Oh Hellos'  
"Dear Wormwood"



By Nicholas Mattheus

## Verse 1, Asheya

As dawn danced on the horizon of a world reduced to rubble, a blaze of light shone onto the ancient ruins of a former society. Relics of cities and towns now covered the roads that mechanical horses used to trot. Where civilization once stood now lays the last bit of humanity.

There stood a prince. Crowned with scars that were tailored with light and dim hues, rusted hair that stuck out like a cactus. He did not stand alone. Alarmed, he did not dare to take another step. If he chose to move, it would have given *her* the freedom to move too.

A gentle smile was painted along her face. The knife that twirled through her fingers like a dancing swan on a stormy day, was not what brought his fright. Instead, it was her jade eyes, with deep emerald crystals, that kept him in check. The prince stayed put, still and anxious like the buildings that rested alongside the two.

*Run.* They yelled. Run like the cowardly little boy you are and find a new way to survive. Run. They screeched. *Run,* and find more rubble to crouch underneath. *Run.* His thoughts begged, yet he did not obey.

He refused to listen to his mind. The same thoughts that have yelled at him time and time again, the same thoughts that have never rescued him from life or death decisions. There was something here, something he's scoured for all these years. Something he's looked tirelessly for, something that he could remember. That glimmering smile, those pearly teeth. It is all too familiar.

Who is this woman? Why does she stay, why doesn't she run? Is she after him? Does the Greedy King seek an audience with him once more? Why would such a man want him again? The same man who rewarded him these scars?

That smile. It's as if he's forgotten his favorite flower, but he's found it once more. His lips trembled as his thoughts pestered him to leave. They squawked and shouted, as they twisted in his mind with restlessness and impatience. But he stayed, he stayed and asked a simple question that was so small yet so broad. With the rough grumble of the prince's ancient voice, he requested to know. "Who are you?"

The wind stole her smile, it fluttered away as if it were never there. Her eyes swelled to a somber tint when she stared back into the prince's soul. There was something there he hadn't seen in years.

"Look at how you've grown..." Her words trailed off into whispers, the knife she once held now laid with dust on top of the rubble. She sounded soft and delicate, like an orchid that survived a storm. "You have done so well..." Her tender smile was replaced by a shameful and regretful frown that stained her face with guilt. She hummed, and the soft sound grew louder as she lightly stepped closer to the prince. "I've missed you." His eyes twitched to contain the dread he's been holding, forever alone in this world so ruthless and unforgiving. The prince hasn't seen her face since he was an innocent child.

His eyes pricked with tears, the pain he's endured to forget about her now seemed so pointless. He did not dare to hold her in his thoughts, he did not dare to disobey his mind. He did not dare disobey the demands of the Greedy King. The atrocities the king committed all to make the prince forget what

it meant to be human. Even after he escaped the grip of the king his thoughts remained loyal.

He forgot what she looked like. He'd almost forgotten her smile, but a son could never sin in such a way. He longed to see it once more. He longed for something that he could not even remember. His arms could not resist.

Instead of concealing the emotions that begged to be set free, he embraced them. He channeled them into something he hasn't felt since childhood. He hugged her.

“I know who you are now. I know who you are.”



By Nicholas Mattheus

### Verse 2, Barachiel

No matter how many years or decades had passed, the demands of tyrants never seemed to leave his disarrayed mind. Although he has returned to his mother's care and his life has been lavished with glee, there lingers a certain feeling. A feeling that flapped around his chest and turned his mind upside down. Something still pressed him to look for something else, so he searched every day.

He explored nature and history, he gazed at ancient buildings and plants that stood taller than any ruin. He studied every crack and crevice that littered the roads and the earth. The prince investigated any and all hiding places, yet he could not find who or what he was looking for.

Along his expeditions of survival and searching he found others like himself, but a celebration should never be planned when this occurs. Instead, you run. Perhaps he should have communicated, perhaps he should have found out if the survivors were the ones he'd been so desperate to discover. But when his mind told him to run, he obeyed this time.

When society fell, any and all laws that bound people to civilization crumbled. People as young as teens and as old as grandparents flared into frenzies that only harmed others in their path. These *monsters* were merely humans that acted upon the will to live, by doing so they committed sins they could never change. Sins that made atrocities seem like small mistakes which made it feel like a daily

task. The worst part was the prince couldn't tell the difference between a simple survivor or a ravenous monster that waited to rip him apart. The good news was, eventually he started to tell the difference. The bad news: he *found* a monster.

He danced a fearful tango with the trees, as he hopelessly delved deeper and deeper into the dark forest. He fled the charging beast that tailed behind him with a panicked mind. Gasps of air escaped from his chest, his legs burned from every step that's pushed him further from the bony mask. An arachnid-like mask, with eight holes that peeped like eyes.

*Run*, survive and watch the sun rise another day little angel. *Run*, and you may not lose your mother again; there's a promise of a rewarding hug if you *run*. *Run boy, run*.

His thoughts were louder than his panting as they barked and snapped at him. They pushed him, stabbed him with the fear of death. He did not look, he refused to turn his head at the terrifying monster that followed. Sticks snapped and leaves cracked; that is all that echoed in the dark woods as the wind howled by his ears. *Run*, he thought. His chest burned. *Run*. His legs ached. *Run*. His heart dropped. Sharp thin claws crept up to his neck, as they pinched the back of his head with a grip that made him wince.

Without his control, without his own doing, he was swept into the ground. His face was smashed against the cold earth. Leaves crunched at the jerking movements, his head was left spinning like dandelion seeds in the breeze. All he felt was the panic that rattled his gentle heart, it quivered so vigorously he almost mistook it for excitement.

There was nothing after that, it's as if the sky faded to dusk. But it wasn't the sun that dipped below the horizon, it was his eyes. Was he dying? Was this how it ended? All those years of survival, only to be devoured by a beast. Was this the price of his sins? His thoughts faded away, they slowly slipped away from his grasp. With one final thought, he uttered, "*Goodbye mother...*"

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A blaze shone upon the world once more as the cold shiver of the forest trickled against his face. He felt his hands and limbs against the coarse bark of the tree, the leaves traced a burning itch on his back. He could hear the quiet shuffling of something, like an animal, tripping through the cold soil.

The prince's eyes fluttered open with a trembling gasp. The mask was inches away from him as its eyes gazed down from behind the bony cover. Its cloak concealed its body, it covered its whole figure like the dark wings of a raven. It had long curly hair, braids that could flick the leaves away with a turn of its head.

Terror paralyzed him, his thoughts continued to chant. *Run boy, run*. They chanted as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did, perhaps he should obey this time. Run while he still had the chance. Run, even with his fatigued state. They told him to run back to his mother and whimper in her arms. They told him to run, and maybe he'd be fast enough to surpass his thoughts. They told him to run, and he might just live.

Yet as he laid there, the beast observed. It stretched its neck and crept closer like a sunflower who grew and followed the sun. He wished to be invisible, he wished he could curl up in a ball and sob. Helplessness pricked his eyes, a cold feeling ran through his hands like ivy growing up a tree. He heard the monster's breath underneath the pale mask, and all he did was stay frozen.

It was until the monster's neatly braided hair swiftly passed by his leg, the prince caught sight of a glimmering clamp that gripped the end of the hair with a golden shine. It had swirling patterns that ocean waves would envy. The rare metal was something the prince had only ever seen once. Back when being alive was merely a forethought to the luxury of youthful age. Back when he was a child. Someone

he loved dearly wore something similar. Rage festered from within the prince. Perhaps this *thing* killed them— ripped them apart piece by piece and ravenously ate away at their cold, still corpse, taking the clamp as a prize. Courtesy of its kill, or...

The prince muttered, and his fingers quaked as he lifted them up to grab the mask for himself. Curiosity swirled though his mind as he questioned. “Who are you?” The marbled hands of the prince continued to flutter their way to the mask. As he slowly curved his fingers around the edges, he expected the loose string that held the mask to tear right off.

He could hear the masked monster’s heavy breath from beneath the bone. The prince’s worry only grew from deep under his skin. The trees whispered in awe as gusts tumbled the orange leaves that laid on the ground. The clouds that overcasted the sky kept moving, like a field of wheat that swayed with the wind.

The bright timid panting continued to bloom from below that arachnid mask, as the strings became undone and the mask fell to the earth. There stood a man, with running scars and dull eyes. A once soft face now marbled with thundering lines that etched down his face and onto his lips. His tender eyes filled like a glass of water, his tears staining his face as they surfed down. There was no monster here, no beast that could tear the prince to shreds. It was just a lost man. A lost, lonely man that searched, just like him.

The prince stopped choking what he was holding back. All those years of dread and emptiness he held onto while walking the hollow streets of the old world. He let go of the confined emotions, letting them drip from his eyes and down his chin. He wrapped his arms around the man, his fingers folded between one another, as they became tangled within the person’s hair.

Between panting sobs, the prince finally managed to mutter the words he’s waited years to say. “I know who you are now,” for how could a son forget the face of his own father, “I know who you are.”



By Nicholas Mattheus



### Verse 3, Azrael

There he stood, his boots pressed against the soft ground of the lakeside. It was not often that joy bloomed around the prince. He only remembered the feeling after he escaped the grasp of the king. He remembered his smile when the chains were lifted and he regained control of his own limbs. But now he smiled knowing that his mother was reunited with her lover, that he no longer worried about not being loved. He could finally tell himself that he was not alone, and believe it.

What more is there to search for? Who else could occupy his thoughts? For years, the only shape his hands knew were fists— always ready to fight for survival. His hands only knew the feeling of blood and torment, they beckoned for something more than pain. How would he change that? How does he let go of this expectation of kill or be killed? How can he be changed? The clay was sculpted and burned, and there is no way to mold it further. There is no way for the prince to be reformed, there was no escape for what he had become.

As white dreary clouds hid the bright eye of the sky, the prince still stood at the edge of the lake. The horizon was gray and silvery, and the water reflected the same bright color. In the reflection, his tired eyes gazed upon dark trees that reached towards the clouds and the ravens that flapped their thundering wings. Other than the roaming animals, the lake was still and hushed. No ripple disturbed the perfect lake, it was untarnished and beautiful. It acted as if it were a mirror facing the sky. Standing at the sight of such radiance, one can only believe they have made it to the Field of Reeds.

The prince stared down with a colorless expression, his sight dwindled down, only to focus on his reflection in the water. All he could think was just how repulsive his face was. He looked pale for having dark skin, his eyes looked lifeless. He'd lost the jade his mother gave him; his eye no longer shimmered like he remembered. It has been years since the prince had seen himself, and he continued to think of just how hideous he looked. His skin was covered in ripped scars, each one more faded and awful than the last.

When he was a young boy, he stood before a king. He thought nothing of it. He thought he would simply bow and leave before anything happened. But loyal guards took the prince somewhere, they took him where even the sun could not touch. They took him beneath the soil and under the palace, traveling down flights of stairs and passing dozens of jail cells. They shackled him to the ground and left him as he starved and sobbed to be freed from his punishment. But he never tasted his freedom. The prince was forced to be a gladiator. An executioner, *the Prince of Death*. They made him kill and punish those unloyal to the Greedy King. The crowd called him the prince and he despised that name as much as he hated the king. He was stuck in that cycle: starvation, suffering, sanction. Every day since he was young, pain was all he felt.

Tired of staring at his face and reliving his memories, his sight traveled towards his inked hands. Signs of being owned by others. The king marked his left hand when he was— well, he can't remember how old he was, but it was long ago. His right hand was stained with red ink, the sign of being owned by the Overlord.

When he escaped the Greedy King, one other ruler decided to get in his way. Not a king, but an overlord. A tyrant that ruled with an iron fist around his people and held mercy for no one other than his sister. No better than the Greedy King. The Overlord took the Prince in, greeting him with food and shelter along with kindness he hasn't seen in years. A simple and naive way to survive. The Overlord did not welcome the prince into his stronghold out of kindness, but out of malevolence. The Overlord trapped the prince within his walls, forcing him to pay the price for all his sins. Torment became a daily vitamin for the prince, facing justice for all those he killed and harmed.

Everyday he's reminded of the *monster* that he is. The monster he would always be. The sins, the

taboos, the guilt? All shown by the marks and scars that wrapped around his body.

*Monster*, his thoughts chanted. *Monster*, they protested. *Monster*, is that what he is? Is that what he always will be? Will anything ever change? Will he always be seen as nothing more than a beast? Is there truly nothing he can do? The chanting continued... is this who he really is? Is he truly a monster trying to convince himself otherwise? His thoughts mercilessly interrogated him, the same thoughts that have kept him alive all this time. The same thoughts he disobeyed to escape the Greedy King. The same thoughts he disobeyed to hide from the Overlord. The same thoughts he disobeyed to find his mother and father. The same thoughts he could disobey now.

The prince stared down at his reflection with disgust and repulsion. Letting his words slip from his tongue, he timidly confessed. "I want to be more now."

He acknowledged his voice, but went quiet as he heard the echo of something he could not recognize as his own. His voice sounded weak, like an animal that yearned for help. He asked— no, prayed that his thoughts would surrender to him. Prayed that they realized he can be more than a monster. But the chanting continued.

"I want to be more than this!" Not a voice in his head, nor the thundering claps of bird wings sprouted from the trees as he roared to the lake. For a second, his head became silent. Without a thought to litter his mind, he thought he overcame himself, however, the chanting continued.

With rage and frustration, he swung his arm through the surface of the water. The prince splashed the lake and sent droplets of water flying everywhere, disrupting the peaceful perfection of the silvery lake.

He never knew what it meant to self reflect, nor did he know how to. He wanted to chase away all the bad thoughts and send them running. He wanted them to scatter and never invade his mind again. But no matter what he yelled out to the quiet lake, they continued to chant everything that he was trying to escape.

Should he give up? Accept his fate as the monster that the tyrants forced him to be? Can he never find himself?

With heavy eyes, he looked up to the silver sky. Glaring at the radiant sun that danced behind the moving clouds. The sky looked almost perfect. The clouds were covering everything with a soft dove color. But it failed in perfection when the clouds parted with dark cracks. He could see where each cloud was above or below another, giving the picture that there are faults or rifts that split the overcast. But it was still gorgeous, wasn't it?

His head fell back to the lake. Glaring back at his own reflection with hatred, following each hideous scar that stained his skin with imperfections. Only a monster could look like that. But he looked back up at the sky, adoring the imperfections that made the overcast so stunning in the first place.

The Prince started to realize that the sky was no different than him. It looked ripped and shredded, monstrous on rainy days, and ferocious during thunderstorms. When the monsters of the sky weren't raining down, it was beautiful; even when the sky ruptures with light and loud noises, there's still a beauty that hides in the danger.

This monster he loathes within himself, perhaps it is no more than thunder on a stormy day. Perhaps this monster his thoughts want him to be, is no more than another part of himself he hasn't learned to live with yet. Perhaps, he should love the imperfections of himself, just how he loves the imperfections of the sky. He can be beautiful like the sky, even as the monster he is supposed to be. He knows who he wants to be.

And they stopped chanting.

The prince relaxed, taking steps deeper into the frosty water of the cool silver lake. His gaze peeked back at his own reflection with a gentle smile, mused as he saw how his skin wrinkled near his eyes when he revealed his teeth. A thought crawled into his head, and his smile only grew wider. He forgot what his name was, another thing that the king stole from him. But it brought him such joy to find it once more. He enjoyed knowing who he was. He enjoyed knowing who he wanted to be. He enjoyed loving what he wanted to be. With a timid breath, he uttered his name to the lake with glee. "Azrael."



*By Nicholas Matheus*

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